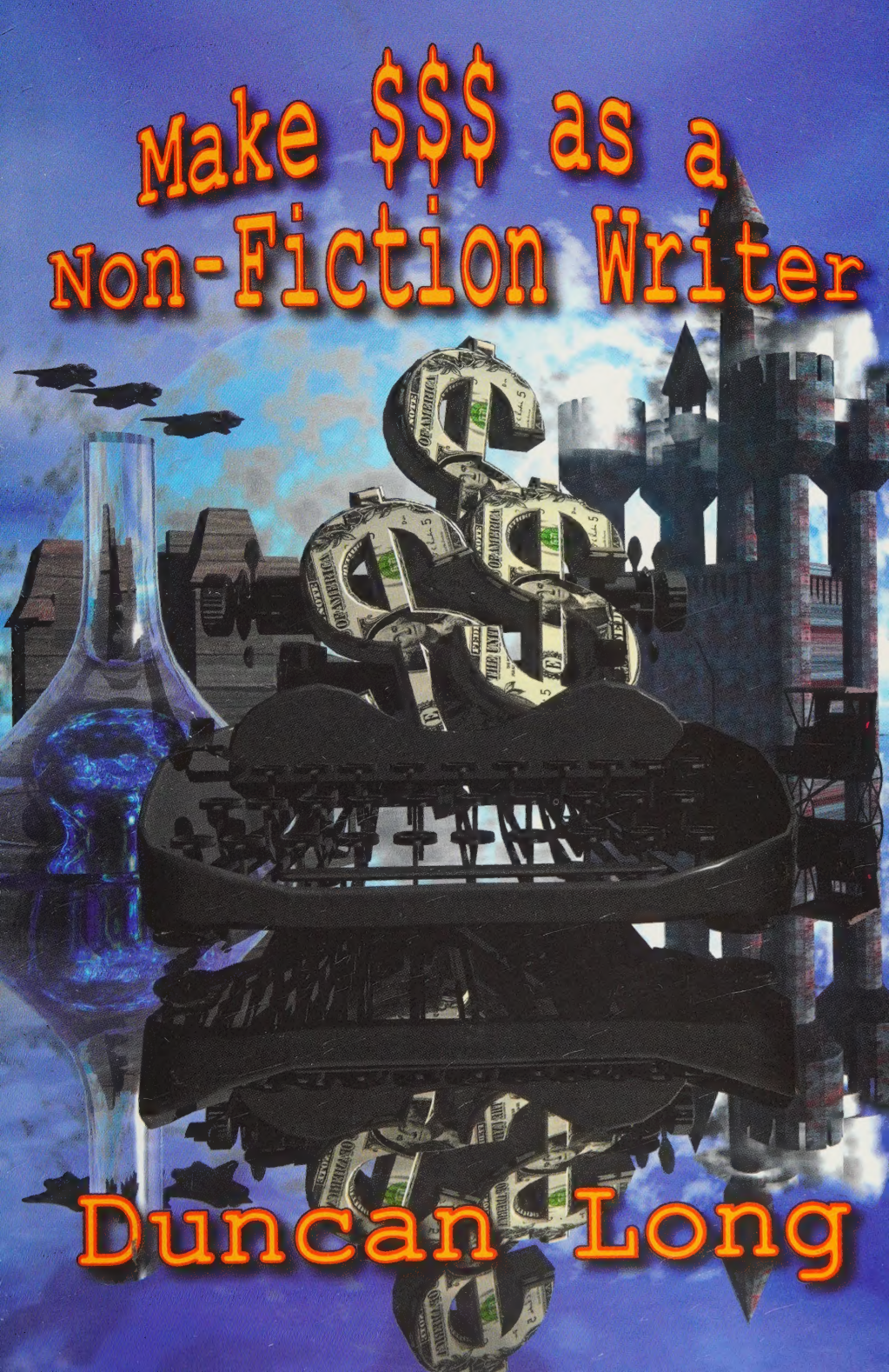
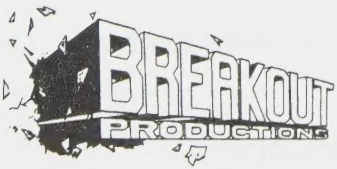
Make $$$ as a Non-Fiction Writer



Duncan Long

Make $$$ as a Nonfiction Writer

by Duncan Long



Breakout Productions
Port Townsend, Washington

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Published by:
Breakout Productions
P.O. Box 1643
Port Townsend, WA 98368

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Cover design by Harlan Kramer

ISBN 1-893626-41-5
Library of Congress Card Catalog 00-100319

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WARNING

All recommendations and technical data presented here inevitably reflect the author's individual beliefs and experience. Therefore the information in this publication should be used for guidance only and approached with great caution. Neither the author nor the publisher assumes any responsibility for the use or misuse of information contained in this book. Neither the author nor the publisher advocates any violation of any current laws nor recommends the breaking of future laws. The information in this publication is for informational purposes only.

About the Author

Duncan Long is an internationally recognized technical and fiction author with nearly 70 books that have gone into print. Long's books deal with everything from firearms and chemical weapons to health manuals and how-to books.

Long has also authored the nine-book action/adventure Night Stalkers series (HarperCollins) as well as the science fiction novel, *Anti-Grav Unlimited* (Avon), and the young person's science fiction trilogy, *Spider Worlds* (HarperCollins).

His firearms and chemical/biological warfare books are in the libraries of the CIA, U.S. Marines, FEMA, and other U.S. agencies as well as the library of at least one foreign embassy and the EPC (Emergency Planning, Canada). The FBI has requested that his firearms books be sent to their FTU (Firearms Training Unit) at Quantico. Four of Long's manuals are currently used by the International Correspondence Schools. Long has also been asked to write articles that will appear in the TBN Enterprises' World's Submachine Guns reference manuals. His articles also appear in several sites on the Internet.

Before becoming a full-time writer, Long secured an MA in music education and enjoyed working at a variety of jobs, including rock musician, public school teacher, and a very short stint as a mail carrier. He's been featured on several radio and

TV shows and for a time even hosted his own talk radio program. Currently Long also creates illustrations for sci-fi and fantasy magazines and Web sites ("More as a hobby," he notes.). On occasions he can be found teaching a college class on how to get into print.

Long lives in eastern Kansas with his wife, two children, and a pair of blue heelers. You can visit his Web site at DuncanLong.com.

Introduction

Many people want to be writers. Most never realize their dream, or settle for writing for free in a local paper or an obscure newsletter. This is a shame because almost anyone who wants to become a published writer or even make a living as a writer can do so *if* they know a few tricks and are diligent in their efforts toward creating a writing career.

Of course, the *real* money is in writing best sellers. Advances for an established writer who's hit the best-seller list can run into the millions of dollars and the public is prompt to purchase books — and sometimes poorly written ones at that — from an established author.

But...

Becoming a best-selling author is more a matter of luck than talent; or you need to be a famous movie star or ax murderer (in which case your success is assured). Of course, if you're in the latter category probably someone will be ghost writing the book for you anyway. ("Ghost writing" being when a publisher hires a writer to create a manuscript which then has the celebrity's name tacked on it — which is how most famous people get their books written. Good news for writers, disillusioning for fans that lap up every word that was never written by their hero.)

The horror of things is that for every best seller there are literally thousands of good to excellent manuscripts in editors' "slush piles" that never get read beyond a page or two. The situation has become so competitive that most major publishing houses won't accept a manuscript unless it's submitted by an agent.

And most agents won't look at a manuscript unless it's from a published author. Catch-22. The system keeps the little guy who's starting from ever getting to the starting line. He has been virtually shut out of the market.

So making your living by writing the "great American novel" can be about as easy as winning a state lottery: Many attempt it but few are chosen.

Of course, this isn't how Hollywood TV shows and the movies portray writers. These guys do nothing most of the time, whip off a book once in a while, and earn tons of money while traveling the world after that successful first novel. That just isn't how it is for the average writer. If you're interested in writing as a get-rich-quick scheme, you're better off sticking to investing in Florida's underwater real estate.

How bad are things in the writing business?

The average writer in the U.S. makes somewhere around $10,000 to $15,000 per year. That's the average. The majority of authors undoubtedly earn far less than that, given the huge million-dollar-plus advances people like Lawrence Sanders, Stephen King, or other successful writers pull to skew the average higher — meaning those at the bottom of the curve are hurting more than the average might make you think.

Even if you're willing to work for a business, pay isn't a whole lot better. Although editors and reporters have seen their wages rise 46% on average the past decade, there's a lot of catching up to do. In 1997, the median starting salary for

journalists with a bachelor's degree hit $23,000.[1] Compare that to what you could earn in almost any profession and you see that there's a seriously low salary base you have to fight against to make a living.

On the other hand, it isn't impossible to make a decent living in the writing business. While many talented fiction writers are competing for the crumbs that large publishers dole out, especially those trying to sell novels to limited markets like action/adventure, Western, or science fiction markets, this isn't so true in the nonfiction writing market. In fact, as you read through many magazines and nonfiction manuals, you'll see that often markets have to make do with less than talented writers. (If you don't believe this, study a few press releases or the instruction manuals from several large manufacturers. These are often so poorly written as to be unintelligible.)

While nonfiction writers don't drive expensive cars and jet around the world like the handful of best-selling novelists do, they also aren't hurting for work like the *average* fiction writer is. Nonfiction writers generally don't go begging for work the way most would-be novelists do. Nonfiction writers who have a little talent can make a decent salary and — with the current information explosion occurring in both science and business — are in much greater demand than are fiction writers.

What is a Nonfiction Writer?

"Nonfiction writing" is a huge field. It covers articles written in newspapers and magazines, technical writing for manu-

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[1] Journalist Salaries Turn Up At Last, Reuters, 9/22/1999.

als and science journals, and how-to books. Many nonfiction writers practice "switch hitting" from one area to another in order to "pump" a living from several small sources of writing income. Almost anyone with a little sense, curiosity, and a modicum of writing skill can find an interesting topic and make money in the nonfiction writing arena.

How does one become a nonfiction writer?

In the past, a person could become a writer more or less by hit and miss. That certainly is how most writers whose nonfiction books and articles you'll find on the newsstand today got started. But the days of "stumbling" into the nonfiction writing field are numbered. More and more people are buying powerful word processors and ever-greater numbers of potential writers work from their homes.

Just because most of the "old timers" stumbled into the writing field and carved out niches for themselves, that doesn't mean *you* can. No editor is in the business these days to "give a beginner a break."

Remember that editors and writers are like mercenaries (and members of other old professions): They do their dirty jobs for cash. So you should plan on working hard and occasionally fighting if you wish to really make it as a writer.

That said, the rest of this book will deal with the HOW-TO of what you'll need to get started in a career as a nonfiction writer: how to discover markets, how to hone your skills, and areas which you can branch into to make even more money. Since nonfiction writing can be done freelance or as a staff position, we'll also look at some of the pros and cons of both types of work.

Chapter One
Getting Started

As with most professions, getting started as a nonfiction writer is difficult. Doubly so for freelance writers having to begin on their own without the benefits of a company or in-house "old timer" who knows the ropes. Many writers have to learn things the hard way.

That said, the best way to become a nonfiction writer is to procure a college degree in journalism (perhaps with a secondary science or business degree) and land a nonfiction writing job with a large company.

Unfortunately, such assignments are rare, especially for those with little writing experience. Few employers are going to hire a green and untried writer when there are seasoned writers vying for the same positions. Do look for such jobs if this is where your interest is. But also be prepared to drop back and punt as a freelancer should you not discover such a job is available for you.

Chances are good you'll have to start small and climb your way up.

The best way to do this, and certainly the safest from a financial point of view, is to hone your abilities by writing part-time while holding down full-time employment. This allows you to develop at your own pace and "polish your prose" without worrying about whether or not you'll have enough

cash to put food on the table. It's troublesome enough to write without the added fear of starving to death. Part-time writing permits you to use the "tricks" outlined later in this book, gives you a chance to build a reputation for yourself and establish important contacts with editors and those in the area you're writing about, and also gives you an escape hatch in the form of your full-time job should you discover that you can't make a go of it in writing.

Of course, if you can write full-time, you'll establish yourself as a writer more quickly. There are fortunate souls who have outside income in the form of a disability check, a working spouse, or a generous estate. If you are this type of person, you can launch out and see how well you can do as a writer. If you're not one of these, you should be cautious and take your time.

Taking your time seems to be the way it's done in the writing business. Most of the "great" fiction writers don't really hit their stride until they reach their forties; most established nonfiction writers are the same. Many of those writing the articles you see in print are pushing what is the retirement age in many other professions.

Why this is, is enigmatic. Possibly writers are just slow starters. But it's likely due in part to the fact these writers had to hold full-time employment before they could earn enough writing to support themselves. Also, it seems that the human mind doesn't "wake up" to reality until about two or three decades of life have passed. Age helps give an author the ability to polish and judge his writing as well as gain real depth in how he perceives things and humanity.

Of course, this doesn't mean you should wait until you're forty to try your hand at writing. It takes a lot of practice to become good at anything — including writing. So even if you aren't selling articles, the process of simply writing can be very important in building your skills. The would-be writer

must be patient and remember that the best is yet to come if he's only in his teens or twenties. If you get published before forty, that's great. If not, hang in there.

The Writing Career

With a career hitting its stride at forty, you would think writers' careers would be like meteors briefly flickering and then vanishing. In fact, writers usually live to a ripe old age. In addition to the promise of a full life, the longevity of the average writer is a big plus in terms of money. While many workers learn they are being let out to pasture in their sixties (a strange occurrence, given the greater life expectancies these days), the writer can smile at his peers spending their leisure at exciting games of shuffle board or adventuring at lawn care while he continues to interview people and uncover what's going on behind the scenes.

Writers can keep writing as long as they can remember who they are; they need never become "has beens" in their chosen field. Athletes may have to retire at 35, actors grow too wrinkled to land the part, and laborers may become too laid up to drive a truck. But most writers keep their minds intact and continue to develop their skills right up to a few days before being lowered into the ground. (And sometimes even after a successful writer dies, he continues to write, as his family hires a tribe of ghost writers and proofreaders to augment his toil, "discovering" manuscripts for years after he is gone. But that's another story...)

On the flip side of things, writers discover that they can practically retire and work at the same time. Modern word processors/computers effect erecting an office almost anywhere — from a bedroom, to a motel room, to the back of an RV. Authors need not be anchored to any location and can

often "vacation" while doing research or interviews for writing projects. A writer can have the best of retirement today and continue to bring in money as long as he remains coherent.

Another plus is that nonfiction writers are also less apt to "burn out" on the job than is the case in other occupations. The reason for this is simple. If an author grows bored with a subject, he can simply commence writing about another one. Friends of nonfiction writers are frequently puzzled by how easy it is to change from one subject to another. ("How can you write about economics?" I've been asked. "I thought you were a gun writer." As we'll see later, the "facts" and research behind writing are not the exacting part of wordsmithing. The trick is actually creating the article and arranging the facts, not in gaining the information or "expertise" about a field.)

When many workers get tired of a job, they have to go back to school and then start at the bottom of the payment scale. With nonfiction writers, boredom with one subject means simply abandoning it and finding new publishers willing to print what you learn and write about in a totally new area. The mechanics of writing stay the same, but the subject matter can be as varied as you want to make it.

Pen Names

The ability to quickly switch gears and write in different areas (for example, economics and the automotive market) often causes authors to be tempted to employ pen names. In truth, the use of a pen name is frequently a mistake.

One reason a pen name can be a mistake is that a few readers/fans will be interested in reading *anything* you write. These fans can boost the sales of books that you may produce,

or will write letters to the editor praising the last article that appeared in a magazine. This does a lot to boost your career.

There won't be a multitude of these folks, but there will be a smattering of them and they're worth their weight in gold. You don't attract fans if you've changed your "handle" from one area of your writing to the next. So use your real name unless there is some good reason not to.

And there are some good reasons to use pen names. One being if you've been unfortunate enough to land a contract with a clause giving the publisher the right to see and purchase or reject your next book (or, more rarely, magazine) manuscript. In such a case, you can use a pen name and a little discretion and sell to a second publisher without getting into hot water.

The ethics of this are a bit shaky, however. So I would recommend that if it is at all possible, you avoid these contract clauses since they complicate securing additional writing projects. Most publishers will strike the clause or modify it to have the options within "x" number of years on two more books. Explain that you have a lot of ideas and manuscripts floating around and you want to give them the best or most suitable for their publishing house. They'll generally agree to strike this clause.

If the publisher won't strike the clause, you can still sign the contract and then, if you have to, exercise another ploy of seasoned writers. You simply send the publisher an old manuscript that other publishers thus far have rejected. Most writers have a number of such manuscripts squirreled away in a box or their desk. Dust one or two off and send them to the publisher if you simply must void the contract's clause. (Don't do this unless you have to, after all, you will have a direct line to the editor with the manuscript, making him more likely to accept your manuscript, since you'll bypass all the assistant

editors who might reject it.) Treat your publishers with respect or you may learn you don't have any to treat.

A pen name can also rarely be of use if your tome might endanger your family (*How the Mob Controls Congress*, for example) or might cause embarrassment (*My Sex Change Operation*). Or you might want to employ it with a subject that could get you into legal hot water (*How to Beat the IRS*). In such cases, having a pen name may not make it impossible for those offended to find you, but will slow them down a bit.

One final spot for a pen name is when you're stuck with a moniker that doesn't help in the market. An author whose real name is "Martha Love" is going to have trouble selling articles to *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. But if she uses "Frank Stone" or some masculine, gung-ho name, she's halfway there. More than a few women write for "male" magazines and men write for women's magazines, thanks to pen names.

A few writers have to employ pen names because they are *too* successful. In such a case they have articles appearing all over the place. What can happen is that editors decide they want to be different and avoid having it appear they are using the same writers their competitors are; at that point you may wish to adopt a pen name to avoid having your name saturate the market.

That said, don't try to employ pen names to fool your publisher. Pen names are to keep your real name out of the public light — but not to keep it from the editor. Use your real name with the understanding that your pen name will appear in print. Otherwise you'll run into legal problems, including having trouble cashing the check the publisher sends out, not having the right Social Security number and name when the publisher reports your earnings to the IRS, etc., etc.

Of course, you might — as in the case of Martha Love above — want to wait to reveal who you really are until *after* the publisher accepts your writing for publication. Then you

can surprise them with the truth. But the sooner the better, as most editors won't be too pleased to learn they've been hoodwinked the same way they like to trick readers with pen names.

It's wise to operate with as few pen names as possible. Stick to one or two so you can build up a following of readers and point out past articles to potential publishers. There are times when a pen name is a good idea, but usually your real name is the best.

Where Do You Want to Go Today?

Being a nonfiction writer has decisive pluses to it. Nonfiction writing can enable you to pursue what's interesting to you at the moment. It's like being able to work on a hobby full-time — and change to a new one when things become boring to you.

For example, if you get interested in a new computer gadget, if you're working at a "normal" occupation, you'll have to shell out hard cash to buy the gizmo. You can enjoy it only during your leisure time. As a writer, on the other hand, you can legitimately deduct the cost of the item from your taxes — or even coerce an editor to foot the bill if you're lucky — and then you get to test the gadget *while* you're working.

Someone pays you to do this!

It's like being able to be a kid again, playing around all day. And, if you wax tired of the subject, you can shift to something else. There are few occupations like this. (This is why many authors refer to any job other than writing as "honest labor.")

Too, you'll soon realize that you have god-like powers — at least in the eyes of some readers. As you gain a name for

yourself, manufacturers will be interested in having you review their products or offer ideas about improving them; and readers will value your opinions. Sometimes you'll have a chance to talk to or interview celebrities who you'd never meet in any profession outside of writing (except perhaps if you were a Hollywood star or a CIA spy).

Nonfiction writing can be pretty heady stuff.

Money, Money, Money

Of course, writing has its down side, too. If you're freelancing, the lack of money and/or not knowing where the cash will be coming from a year from now, or if it will be coming at all, can be worrisome. Anxiety about starving or losing your home is not real conducive to a relaxed life style.

Nonfiction writing for a business is more secure economically, but it has the "downers" of other jobs: you have to punch a time clock, you must often travel in heavy traffic, and you are required to wear the "uniform" of the three-piece suit and/or dress suit. (This seems to be changing, however, with more and more businesses allowing their employees to engage in telecommuting. Hopefully this trend will continue until nonfiction writers, whether toiling for one employer or freelancing will be able to enjoy working at home in an environment they have complete control over and pace themselves according to their own schedule.)

Another shortcoming of being a nonfiction writer is that you get paid by the job, not by the hour. That means the key to making money is churning out quality material. Often this means spending serious time at the keyboard, cranking out manuscripts.

Looking at someone writing at a keyboard, you wouldn't think such work would be physically punishing. The "labor"

consists of simply wiggling your fingers over a keyboard, right?

Not quite.

What happens is you sit in place for long stretches; muscles grow stiff and your posterior tends to fossilize. In fact, over time, writers can see serious injuries in the form of muscle damage to fingers, hemorrhoids or other problems in sitting, and eye troubles. Over time, some writers actually experience serious disabilities sitting day after day, wiggling their fingers over the keyboard.

Worse, due to the low level of energy that's actually burned when typing, if care isn't taken the lack of physical exercise shows up as lumps of fat around major body organs, and poor health.

Don't kid yourself; writing can be hazardous to your health.

Fortunately, a modest exercise program, a Lazy Boy reclining chair, and a keyboard that fits onto the lap all seem to help avoid physical ailments. Be sure to take advantage of exercising from time to time, gazing out the window to relax your eyes, and other tricks you may need to engage in to keep your body as healthy as your mind.

I've known authors who failed to do this. They've written books standing up, reclining on a bed, and/or on their knees. They've had to dictate material because one or another finger has been clobbered by constant typing. Don't join this list of the writing wounded.

Get exercise and constantly watch your routine to be sure that you're not creating a problem that will appear over time. If you discover that your hands are sore after a day's work, your eyesight is failing, or whatever, do something to change your work environment so that condition won't continue. Otherwise you may be looking for another line of work just when you're hitting your stride and bringing in money as a writer.

Now let's take a look at the hardware and software you need to launch a writing career.

Chapter Two
Setting Up Your Office

Those working for a company as a nonfiction writer may wish to simply skip to the next chapter. But some of the basic ideas in this chapter may be of use to writers working for just one company if they take home work or wish to "augment" their job with moonlighting projects.

For those readers who will be working freelance, the first concern is to take care not to waste money when "setting up shop." Always remember that any money you can avoid spending on office equipment is money you'll have for other things. Many people run out and spend themselves into a hole and then have trouble making enough money to pay the bills. And most of those bills were rung up getting into business.

Yes, I know that it's tax deductible. But that's a trap as well if you're not careful. Because you're only deducting from what you make. So even at best it is simply breaking even rather than having some of the money spent for office equipment available for something else. Tax deductions are nice, but cold hard cash can be better.

And wouldn't it be ironic if you had to quit writing so you could get a job to pay for the equipment that was supposed to enable you to be free to write? Yet that's what more than a few folks have to do when they've shelled out top dollar for things they really didn't need to start a new business.

Don't hamstring yourself with bills when starting. Put off the purchase of equipment you don't really need until you have the money to play around with. Never spend a cent that you don't need to spend when starting a business.

One of the nice things about being a freelance nonfiction writer is that your office can be almost anywhere. A bedroom, the kitchen table, or an attic garret can be, and have been, converted into writers' offices. About the only consideration is that you can work without being disturbed too often (which may rule out the kitchen if you have a tribe of children or a spouse working at home with you). It may also be essential that you can leave your pile of books and other reference materials in place without having to pick them up every time you take a break or stop for the day, though more and more digital documents are displacing print documents, making this less of a concern as the years roll along.

Your working environment should be enjoyable to be in. It's hard enough to start writing most days without having to face an office that is improperly heated, seems gloomy, or is otherwise unpleasant to be in. Yes, a few writers have done well toiling in a gloomy corner of a furnace room or in a frosty cabin — but imagine how much greater their output might have been if they had had a nicely lit, warm office.

Word Processing

After you've located an agreeable spot for your office, you'll need to add some equipment to it. There's one essential piece of equipment anyone who's serious about writing these days MUST have: a word processor, most likely in the form of a PC of one type or another.

When I wrote the first edition of this book about a decade ago, there were still a few authors who pecked out their tomes

on an electric typewriter. A few perhaps even used manual typewriters. But those days are gone. Unless you're so famous that a publisher will be glad to even decipher your scribbles on table napkins, forget the idea of trying to do anything on anything but a computer of one sort or another.

If you can't type, then go to school and learn how. Or get one of the new — and thus far not too satisfactory — word recognition programs for your computer and learn to use it. You need to be able to produce work that can be rapidly edited on the screen and which will permit you to send material via e-mail attachment or on floppy disk, since most publishers want such these days to save them having to retype your manuscript once it's accepted.

A word processor will enable you to increase your writing output by a huge margin over what you would have done back when with a typewriter. There is no comparison between the two instruments. It's like the difference between writing with crayons or an electric typewriter. Not only is the word processor faster to use, the final product can be easily transformed after you're finished. Editing, rewriting, or duplication of manuscripts is quick and clean.

That is the good news. It's also the bad news. Because it means there's a lot of people churning out material and sending it to publishers. That means there's a glut of writing these days. However that's not too much of a worry, since, while it is easy to write a lot more with a word processor, it doesn't mean the writing is good. That's still the job of the writer. So while there is more writing floating around, the percentage of good and bad is probably what it has always been — or perhaps even a bit in your favor, since many have more trouble stringing words together coherently than was the case a generation or so ago. (Who says TV doesn't have its good points?)

Of course, the big plus of a word processor is that you can add material willy nilly until it is finally finished, moving paragraphs around or, if you discover more information that needs to be added to your text *after* you've nearly finished it, simply adding it where it belongs.

If you've grown up with word processing, this doesn't seem like much; but to old timers like me, this is nothing short of marvelous and never ceases to amaze me. Back when I started writing, finding something out of order or in need of reworking often meant retyping an *entire* page or even the whole article. Manuscripts were full of White Out corrections and pasted-on corrections that created amazing documents that often had layers of paint and paper on each page. Often articles had to be corrected and then completely retyped before being sent to a publisher.

Since many publishers create their camera-ready work from the text you send them on disk, there's another big plus with the word processor; there aren't any typos *added* to your work when it goes into print. This sounds like a small thing, but again is quite major. I can remember nearly weeping when publishers sent me proofs — or worse, yet, completed books that had gone into print — with errors that had been added by whoever had retyped my manuscript. Now such things are also mostly a thing of the past.

In addition to making the final printout easier, writing the original manuscript is also much faster with a word processor. Large blocks of material can be moved within the manuscript and material from other books or articles you've written can even be pulled from disk or hard drive storage and "plugged" into the article you're working on (with some re-writing to avoid copyright conflicts, of course).

This can be an important plus because it greatly speeds up your work. If, for example, you're writing an article about aircraft, and have previously written about how aircraft navigate,

you could quickly pull up bits from one article and plug it into the other as needed. This type of reworking/recycling material, provided it is done within reason, can speed up the process of creating the new article.

As one of the worst spellers you would ever find, for me another big plus of word processing is the spell checker. However, it must be admitted that spell checkers have their limitations. Since a spell checker operates by comparing the words in a manuscript with the words listed in its "dictionary" and "flagging" any words it doesn't find in the "dictionary," there are two problems with spell checkers. First, if a word is, for some reason, not listed on the spell checker's dictionary, it will flag the word as a possible mistake. For example, Microsoft's spell checker does not have the word "Internet" in its dictionary, and it will flag the word and suggest "internment" as a possible correction. Fortunately, in such a case, you can override the spell checker if you know the word in question is, in fact, spelled correctly.

The other problem with spell checkers is that they see nothing wrong when a word has been misspelled in such a way as to create a different word. Thus, if you typed "big" when you should have typed "bag," a spell checker will find "big" in its dictionary and will not have a clue that there is anything wrong. While a spell checker can be helpful, it is no substitute for a human proofreader who can not only read the words in a manuscript, but also consider their meanings and see if they make sense in context.

What brand of word processor program do you need for a computer? And how about those "stand alone" word processors that do nothing but word processing?

My answer is forget the latter; a computer is a bit more expensive and more complicated to operate, but also has an important plus of being able to access the Internet and also operate other programs that you may discover you need for various

writing operations. Don't buy one of those little word-processor-only units that look nifty but won't be doing anything else for you.

Which Computer

For word processing and accessing the Net, you don't need the newest, fastest computer being offered. In fact, any computer that is a few years old is going to work just great for you. That means you can buy used or outdated equipment at great savings and still have a system that will work just fine for your needs.

When looking for a computer, do get one with a very large hard drive. If you have 8 Gigabytes or larger, you're going to be able to store everything you write, along with any article you ever read for years to come on the Net. What's so great about this?

The big plus is that with the material on your hard drive, you can search through it lickity split with any of several search programs and find key words. That means if you read an article on an Internet newspaper a few years ago and saved it "just in case," and then discover yourself writing an article that relates to it, a quick search of your hard drive will locate the story. There the info is, without your having to race down to the library or search the Internet for it. The luxury of being able to save what you read is a real plus that you'll come to appreciate after several years of storing documents.

A big hard drive will also allow you to store quite a few pictures. As this is being written, many publishers are making the move from using regular photographs for articles to using digital pictures. I suspect somewhere down the line guys who can't supply digital pictures with their articles will be out of luck. Having a hard drive to store those pictures on will give

you a leg up (or make it possible to simply go with a digital camera in the first place if you don't already own an older camera).

Another essential for your computer is a fax/modem board. This allows you to send faxes directly from your computer. This can be a plus since some publishers still prefer to have a contract either mailed or faxed to them.

When you go to the computer store, shop on the Internet, or crack open a computer catalog, you'll often be presented with two "camps" of computers: Apples and everything else (generally called PCs or "personal computers"). You will probably be able to get along with either. Apples have a campy following of folks who are a bit snobbish because Apple seems to regularly appear to be on the brink of going out of business.

PCs have been adopted, by and large, by publishers, making most of the editors you deal with likely to have PCs. The only exception to this is with art departments, which generally, with very few exceptions, have people that use Apple Macs (and tend to be the most snobbish of all Apple users).

What this all boils down to is this: You're probably better off with a PC because you'll almost never have trouble sending material to your editor in a format he'll be able to access with a minimum of knowledge about computers. However, if you go with an Apple, you'll probably not have a great deal of trouble and may even have an easier life if you create original digital artwork to illustrate your articles or books (more on this in a bit).

As far as ease of use, both Apples and PCs, regardless of the OS (operating system) in use, have regular glitches and lockups (though the Apple users often lie about this, in my experience). The key thing in avoiding such problems is to set up a bare-bones system with only the basic programs you'll use. These would most likely be a word processing program, a search program or two, and your Internet browser. The closer

you can get to this bare minimum, the more stable your machine will be and the fewer problems you'll have.

Laptops have shortcomings and a generally higher price tag than regular computers, but also offer some pluses to a writer. For one thing, they can be operated almost anywhere, making it possible to set up your office anywhere as well. Nothing beats writing on a screened-in porch during the fall or spring — and such is possible with a laptop.

Laptops do have limitations. Their screens are generally less than ideal for any graphics work, and battery packs never keep charges as long as one might hope. However, if you can operate within the parameters presented by one of these compact machines, give it some serious thought, as they make your life considerably more flexible.

Some writers just about must employ a laptop. If you plan on writing travel articles, for example (a tough life, but someone has to do it), then a laptop is a must. Such a machine coupled with a small printer enables a writer to set up their office wherever they feel like it, indoors or out, almost anywhere in the world.

Ordering a computer via a mail-order company or the Internet is often a good way to save money. This is also pretty safe if you know how to work on your own computer so you can service and replace parts as they wear out or need to be upgraded. PCs are probably the best bet with such tactics and often it is even possible to have one "built" to your specifications and loaded only with the software you need.

On the other hand, if you're not planning on ever opening your computer or servicing it, then you may be better off buying a computer from a local store. That means you may pay a little extra, but you'll also have someone to take it to who will be obligated to repair it while under warranty and who will also be less begrudging when working on it after the warranty has expired. Finding such people to work on a Brand

X you bought at great savings isn't always easy and they may not be so friendly when you do find them, since you didn't do business with them in purchasing the machine.

Computers have very long life expectancies, with the exception of their drives (which have moving parts). That means there is a steadily growing market of cheap used computers. And since you don't need the fastest machine to do word processing, these make good buys. For this reason, you may also want to search the want ads for a machine to suit your needs. Just be sure to test it out when you buy it; if it works, chances are it will continue to work for years to come.

First, you should have an idea of what you're shopping for. Go to a library or magazine stand and hit the Internet for *new and current* information about computers. Learn what's popular and available, and keep an eye on prices so you know what's a fair amount to pay for the capabilities you need. While it is possible to operate a computer as if it's a "black box" whose workings you will never understand, knowing a little about how it works will put you ahead in the game as well.

Once you've become familiar with what computer capabilities are out there and what they cost, you're ready to venture into a computer store and look around. Give yourself some time and don't make any commitments — you may find a better deal in another store, on the Net, or with a mail-order company. While you're in the store, notice whether or not the employees are interested in helping people with problems or in simply selling a computer. If they just sell, you'll be on your own after that, and you might as well order through the mail. All a local store has to offer is service; if they can't do that, shop elsewhere.

People selling computers often get enthused about the newest "hi-tech" gadgets and fastest speeds available for computers. This is understandable, since there are many innovative

products coming into the computer market all the time. But a computer doesn't need too many bells and whistles or any great speed to run a word processing program. Don't shop for hi-tech; shop for proven gear with low price tags. (In fact, you should always be sure to ask if the store has a used, traded-in computer that might be suitable for your purposes. And don't be afraid to check out a second-hand computer being sold through the want ads. Often an older machine will be a bargain.)

Now, let's get to what you do and don't need.

You don't need a giant monitor or large graphics card *unless* you'll be working with digital graphics or pictures you take on a digital camera. Give this a little thought, as buying just one monitor and board is going to be a lot cheaper than replacing these later because you discover what you have fails to do the work.

If you're not doing graphics work, then you can get by with a 15- or 17-inch monitor. While 14-inch monitors are dirt cheap, you're better off avoiding them simply because a slightly larger screen makes life easier for your eyes — and you will be spending a lot of time staring at the screen, so be sure it is going to be something that won't be causing eye strain. (And your eyes will usually do better the farther away the screen is from them — which also dictates avoiding the smallest screen available.)

Don't yield to the temptation to skimp with the monitor; be sure it has a nice, sharp picture and that you can easily adjust the brightness and contrast (adjusting these makes working from the day into late evening less of a strain when you're pushing a project).

How much memory your computer needs is another bugaboo you'll face when shopping for a computer. I did word processing back in the computer dark ages of the 1970s, using a program called "Easy Writer" that ran on an Apple IIe with

48K of memory; it can be done — though today's bloatware programs wouldn't make you think that.

My advice is to get a bunch of memory if you'll be doing graphics work or want to run several programs at once. Don't go by the "minimum" requirements listed by the software manufacturers of the programs you'll be using; these numbers are generally the "just above lock-up" figures and any computer with such minimums will run at the speed thick paint dries. Don't skimp on memory.

The speed of the CPU is a place where you can skimp a little. Graphics need fast chips, but I have done good work with a chip running only at 133 MHz — it is only a tad slow with pictures I create for books and only bogs down with detailed color work of poster size. So it can be done if your pocketbook is a bit light. However, if you're planning to do graphics work or digital photography, then faster is better (within reason) and even a 1,000 MHz chip wouldn't seem too fast for some intensive work.

While more and more material goes to publishers via e-mail attachment, having the ability to send it on disk or CD is a plus. I would avoid a computer that lacked a 3½-inch floppy drive; while such a drive is never used most days, it is handy for quickly backing up text and can store a large book without problem (provided there are few if any illustrations). This makes it ideal for overnight back-ups of your daily work as well as for whipping off a copy of an article or book to send to a publisher. These disks are currently both cheaper and quicker to use than CD or DVD read/write drives, making them ideal for quick-and-dirty copies. About their only downside is that the disks themselves aren't as durable as CD or DVD disks.

Hard drives crash, or your OS can get so corrupted that you lose material on your hard drive. Either way it can be traumatic if you don't back up material from time to time. So I'd

suggest that you employ some sort of backup for what you write and make lots of copies, rather than just going over the same medium time and again; often when a backup system fails, it takes some time to notice — making that discovery when your hard drive has also failed is a real hair-pulling experience.

Tape backups are okay, but I never have been too impressed with them. Magnetic tape — like the magnetic surfaces on floppies — seems prone to errors and "dropouts" over time. This translates into serious problems and unreliable copies when you need them most, during an emergency. So I would recommend a read/write CD or DVD drive (more on these later). If you can buy one of these with your computer, that's great, as it will save some money. But chances are you'll have to add one later.

It's possible to backup your entire computer system, including the OS and desktop layout. But I've never found this too practical, due to the time consumption and huge size of the final backup, given the large capacity of today's hard drives. Too, having to "start from scratch" with the OS and desktop layout allows a complete clearing of deadwood programs seldom used and often rids a system of the glitches that create problems over time.

A better solution (I think) is to copy key sections of your hard drive, concentrating on the original material you have created as well as any reference documents you've downloaded from the Internet or other sources you may have used in research. For maximum protection, I also give my older backup copies (in my case on CDs) to friends and relatives for safekeeping. That way if the house burns down or is washed away in a flood, I'll still have my backups to get up and running with on a new system. Barring a disaster that wipes out a chunk of the US, I should be able to recover, even

if I lose everything and have to start over with a new house and new computer.

It should be noted that dust and static electricity can both damage disks and temporarily scramble a computer's memory. Therefore, it's important to avoid "zapping" your system during dry winter months when static electricity may be generated by a walk across the carpet. (I keep a spray bottle of water around to increase the humidity in the air and dampen the carpet just a tad during the winter — especially if I may be doing work on the computer.) Spraying fabric softener or "cling free" detergent additives onto a carpet or chair that creates problems will also reduce static electricity damage.

And, of course, that granddaddy of static electricity, lightning, can fry a computer should there be a strike on a power or phone line. So be sure to disconnect the phone and power from your computer during thunderstorms; it's better to lose a few hours during a heavy rain than be shopping for a new computer afterwards.

It is also wise to have a master switch power strip that will stop power spikes on your phone and power lines. These generally don't cost a whole lot more than standard strips, but might save you some grief should the power or phone company have a problem that sends too much voltage your way. (Despite what advertising may say, I wouldn't trust these units to stop a lightning surge — few inexpensive units are capable of doing that with more than the smallest of strikes.)

If you're in an area with brownouts, then you might also want to invest in one of the battery-operated power units that plugs between your AC plate and your computer. These will give you a few minutes to close down your computer files without losing work — a good time saver and also something that prevents a lot of frustration. (A somewhat less effective but considerably cheaper alternative is to simply set your word processor or other programs to automatically back up your

work every ten or fifteen minutes, thereby guaranteeing you won't ever lose more than that much work due to a power outage, computer lockup, or other accident.)

Dust also creates problems with computers so be sure to keep your work area clean and — if you live in a really dusty area — take care to cover the computer with a dust cloth or plastic bag when it isn't in use.

Accessorize

Having the right accessories with a computer can greatly increase your production. And having the wrong ones can slow you down.

One to consider investing in is a scanner. These permit digitizing photos, contracts, or other materials that are to be faxed. Scanners are also handy for creating pictures of small objects — something a lot of folks don't realize. If you need a sharp picture of a coin, medal, or other object that is small enough to fit on a scanner, then you can get really detailed pictures this way. With the addition of an OCR (optical character recognition) program, it is also possible to scan documents and then turn them into text; this can be very useful when updating a book that is available only in print, or for saving reference material from books or magazines you've borrowed.

Most any computer will come with a cheap, awful mouse. Replace it with something that will give you better service. Don't skimp here, as a mouse is a pain to use at best (one sage has suggested a mouse would be perfect for writers with three hands — a point that isn't far off the mark). Go to a store that lets you test out the equipment and see whether a trackball, optical mouse, or some other such system is best for you.

CD players have become standard with most computers (with DVDs fast replacing them). However, if you'll be

working with a digital camera (more on these in a moment), or otherwise producing artwork to go with your manuscripts, I would recommend that you pull out the CD or DVD player that comes with most computers (after you've installed all the programs you'll be using) and replace it with a CD or DVD play/record unit.

This permits burning your own CDs or DVDs. This may not sound like much of a plus, until you realize that several digital pictures will fill a floppy disk — and some are too large to fit on a single floppy. On the other hand, one CD has enough space to hold enough pictures to fill hundreds of floppy disks; the DVD has even more room. Furthermore, these are more permanent than floppies, giving you a good way to backup and archive your material, an important plus as time goes by.

Now the question: Should you choose a CD or DVD recording unit (assuming they're still making the CD write/record drives when you read this)? The answer is going to depend on whether or not most editors you'll be sending the disks to are likely to have a DVD or CD player on *their* machine. If they don't have what you send, then it is going to become a drawn-out headache trying to get the material to them.

Given the fact that most publishers use equipment that is a bit outdated, the CD is likely to remain on editors' desks for some time (with the possible exception of those doing layout work in small operations). So be sure to check if you have doubts. With this in mind, you might also check to see if a DVD write/record unit can both read *and* write CDs; this is doubtful, but if you could find such a unit, then you could cover all bases (you might also put in both a CD and DVD read/write drive — but that would most likely get into some money and more trouble than you wish to go to).

There are currently other methods of storing data and sending it around, including Zip drives and the like. It might be that some of these will become more common in the publish-

ing business outside the art department. But until that day arrives (which — at the rate things go — may be even as you read this book), the CD and DVD appear most likely to remain the media of choice for storing and mailing big chunks of data to your publisher.

Keyboards are another area that requires some attention. Having the right one can make a big difference in ease of operation and work over time. A keyboard is a very personal thing. Again, the best bet is to go to a store and try several. Light key touches can speed things up BUT be sure a keyboard's touch isn't so effortless that you're accidentally hitting keys all the time. If you're ordering through the mail, you have to take potluck on the "feel" of the keyboard. Fortunately, the "tactile touch" keyboard that "snaps" with each keystroke has become the norm; this makes ordering a keyboard over the Net or from a catalog, touch unfelt, pretty safe.

Keyboard designers seem to have been absent from class when the lecture on human engineering was being given. The less movement of your hand around the keyboard, the more efficiently you work and the fewer wrong keys are hit by mistake. Unfortunately, with most keyboards this isn't possible, as you must either move your right hand to a mouse or a set of arrow keys to quickly move a cursor to where you want to be on the screen. While each time you are forced to do this doesn't take a lot of time, the time adds up, as do the mistakes that often result when you move your hand back to the wrong position afterward, or when you are forced to move your eyes from the screen to the keyboard to locate your proper hand positioning.

The decline in keyboard design started with the first typewriter that was designed to slow down typers in order to keep the shortcomings of the metal linkage from becoming apparent. Thus, we've been stuck with a system that gives a lot of

the work to pinky and ring fingers, the weakest digits available for the task.

It went downhill from there, and with a few notable (and unprofitable) exceptions; the keyboard we've been stuck with for over a century has been a miserable offspring of the first sabotaged design. Somehow keyboard designers seem to have been captivated by the idea of keeping the keyboard awkward, with incremental steps backward occurring with alarming regularity (as with the "improved" change to the 101-key layout from the better, older 84-key or "5060" style that was faster and less awkward to use).

There's not yet any complete solution to this problem, but there are some things you can do to improve the situation somewhat. One would be to locate a keyboard with a pointing device located in a position between the "G" and "H" keys — should one be available. These mini-joysticks make sense — unfortunately no one has created a very effective one just yet, so the few that have appeared in the past have since sunk into oblivion (hopefully a new one will have surfaced by the time you read this). Ditto with touch pads. Should someone ever create such a keyboard that permits reaching a pointing device with the index finger, I'll be standing at the front of the line.

Until then, there are some other "fixes" that you may wish to consider. I use these and have found they've really speeded up my work and suspect they'll do the same for you.

One is to get a "compact" or "small-footprint" keyboard. These are made for businesses where there isn't a lot of desk space for employees for one reason or another. The main keys are all full size, but some keys are omitted and there's no wasted space between the auxiliary keys. The one I've been using for several years now (actually I'm on my second, having pecked my first one to death) is the "Mini-Keyboard" made in China by Resy. It carries a reasonable price tag and is only about 10½ inches wide. (I've also purchased a "spare," in

case I'm the only clown buying these; hopefully they'll continue to be available for some time, but given how quality keyboards seem to be rare birds, I'm hedging my bets with the spare.)

There are modifications I make to these that could also be done with any standard keyboard. These also greatly speed up my work. One is to pull off all the keys I don't use. Yes, you read that right. Yank them like decayed teeth. This is easy to do with a screwdriver or other small tool — though I found a special tool designed just for this process at a computer store. The two keys I consider "must removes" are the "Caps Lock" key and the "Insert" key; I was forever hitting these two by mistake, creating mistakes that might go on for half a sentence or even several lines before being caught and then causing the need to rewrite as well as a loss of the train of thought. Now those mistakes are a thing of the past because those two keys are *gone*.

I also pry off the Window's menu key (which I never used, but occasionally hit by mistake) along with the keys left over from the Dark Ages of computing: The "Scroll Lock" and "Pause Break" keys, both of which must be used for something, but not with any programs I ever run. If I were really going for the virtual throat of poor keyboard designing, I would also yank the "Number Lock" key, though I've left it just in case my BIOS (Basic Input Output System) should fail to turn it off some day.

You might quit there, but I continued to do a tad more, again with some added success in faster typing and fewer mistakes. I took a hot glue gun (no shuddering, please) and then placed a raised dab of the hot glue on several key buttons that I have trouble finding: The lower "Delete" key, the "Windows" command keys, the "Escape" key, and the "Home" and "End" keys. These small dabs are just what I need to give some feedback that my finger has found the right key before I

hit it. This can be especially important with the Escape key, which can undo a lot of stuff in some programs — a frustrating experience if you didn't aim to hit it.

Such modifications undoubtedly void any warranty on your keyboard — and you might even damage your keyboard with a drop of glue in the wrong place or a keyboard might break when you try to lift it off of whatever it's sitting on. But I have found the risk is well worth it and I suspect you will, too.

There are a few software solutions that greatly improve a keyboard. The best are those that create "hotkey" combinations that permit launching programs without having to use your mouse or go through several menus. One that I'm currently using (under the somewhat stable Windows OS) is WinKey, freeware marketed by Copernic Technologies (http://www.copernic.com/winkey/). After my computer starts, I can launch my word processor by pressing the Windows key along with "W" (the "W" being selected for "word processor"). I can go to the Internet with Windows Key and "I" or to a specific Internet site I've selected with a combination of the Windows Key and one of the number keys. I can also launch my e-mail viewer, computer search engine, art programs, and so forth with similar combinations of keys.

Again this doesn't sound like a great time saver, but over the course of the day it becomes one. (It also is much less frustrating — which I think helps put me in a better mental state to be writing, rather than fighting the mouse and computer to get a program launched or locate an Internet site from the hundreds of entries in my browser bookmarks file.) There are several other programs that do this with other OS's as well as Windows; my advice is to get and install one on your system.

It should be noted that there are several potential damage points with keyboards. One is the Pepsi Syndrome created by liquids spilled into its electronics. Any liquid with sugar in it will damage a keyboard; the carbon in sugar shorts out electri-

cal components. Over time, food crumbs will also take their toll. You should know how to avoid these risks.

It is possible to extend the life of keyboards somewhat by taking them apart and cleaning them, cleaning contacts, or replacing frayed cords. Given the low price tags of keyboards these days, coupled with the short span of time many keyboards last following initial failures and repairs, I'd suggest you simply buy a new keyboard and toss the old one. Yes, it is not a wise recycling practice, but if your time is worth much, earning money with writing rather than saving a few bucks on iffy repairs of your keyboard makes more sense most of the time.

Furniture

Back in the dark ages when typewriters were mechanical monstrosities that had to sit on tables, it was sensible for secretaries, writers, and others dependent on the crude devices to sit upright like little soldiers working at the hot machines. But that's no longer necessary.

In fact, you can type faster, more accurately, and for longer periods if you can recline slightly in a comfortable chair rather than being forced to sit upright in the old-fashioned secretary's chair. Therefore, do yourself a favor and purchase a computer with a removable keyboard that will free you from the drudgery of sitting upright at a desk like someone from the dark ages.

Which chair?

My advice is forget all office chairs. Even if you could find a comfortable one that reclines, it would be quite expensive. Instead, go to a furniture store and test their recliners. Pick one that's comfortable, with arm rests about even with the top of your thighs. This will allow you to rest your elbows on the

armrests and have the keyboard on your lap. This allows you to type while comfortably leaning back. For even better comfort, use the footrest to keep your feet up — and the blood flowing to your brain will undoubtedly help your thinking, right?

A vinyl-covered chair is easy to care for, especially if you like to munch and eat (just keep the crumbs off the computer keyboard); however, if you're in a humid area for even part of the year, then a cloth fabric will be more comfortable and also less prone to causing skin problems of one sort or another (no small consideration when you must sit for hours at a stretch working).

Chairs upholstered in dark colors will show fewer stains than light colors — another consideration, since you'll be spending several hours every day in your chair and may even snack at the keyboard.

Buy your chair first, and then work toward getting your computer set up. If you've chosen to work in a recliner, then you may not need a desk. (I've worked for years without a desk for my computer, instead mounting it on top of a two-drawer filing cabinet, with my monitor now mounted on an "Extenda Float" retractable arm fastened to the wall so the recliner footrest goes under it. This permits a wide variety of viewing angles, so I can work in my recliner, standing, or whatever the need may be.)

Be sure to position your computer's monitor so it faces right angles to any windows or bright light sources. This will reduce glare and eyestrain caused by reflections. Also take pains to adjust the screen to the minimum brightness suitable for the lighting conditions you're in. Ideally you'll change the brightness during the course of a day. Having the brightness too high is like looking into a light bulb. It won't injure your eyes, but does cause eyestrain and makes it hard to read off printed reference books and magazines if you're using any. Also, be

sure to look at objects some way away from time to time; otherwise, you may one day find out that you're becoming nearsighted. Eye muscles need to be exercised by looking at distant objects.

Once you've got your chair, you're pretty well set up in the furniture department. You may wish to get some sort of small side table; I use an old steel typing table next to my recliner; this has a clock, strategic glass of ice tea, a box of Kleenex, and occasionally a book or reference magazine (though this is less and less the case as more reference material goes to my hard drive and CD and DVD disks or is available on the Internet). My advice is to resist the temptation to purchase expensive office equipment designed for computers. Purchase secondhand and visit your local discount store for inexpensive furniture.

Getting your monitor so the screen is facing directly toward your eyes is a plus, both in terms of reduction of distortion on the screen from your perspective, as well as the reduction in eyestrain when the entire screen is at the same focal length. Unfortunately, monitors are still designed with the secretary-forced-to-sit-in-an-upright-chair mindset. Therefore, if you're working in a recliner you may have to use some "add ons" in the form of small chunks of Styrofoam or wood to prop the monitor into the proper angle for your eyes. Don't be tempted to spend a big chunk of change on an expensive swivel stand unless you really feel you need it. The box or Styrofoam works well and is considerably cheaper.

You'll often also discover that you need to consult printed reference material and have nowhere handy to place it. Or, if you've managed to balance it on the arm of your chair, it flops closed, making it impossible to type and keep the book open (unless you're one of those lucky folks blessed with four arms). In such a case, what you need is known as a "copy holder."

Again, shop for price. Copy holders designed for business use can cost a pretty penny. If you like to "shop" garage sales, you might be able to locate an old music stand and use metal paper clips to create a make-do copy holder for holding papers, magazines, or even large reference books that you may need to consult. Most music stores will also sell a folding rack for around $10 to $15. If you can't locate a make-do copy holder, most mail-order computer vendors have such equipment, with prices running from $40 to $60. If you do a lot of work from reference materials, it might make sense to buy a quality unit. But if you only have such a need on occasion, then you'll probably want to make-do with something less expensive and bulky.

In addition to your computer/keyboard/monitor assembly, desk, and chair, another essential piece of hardware you'll need is a computer printer. At one time, these were essential for any correspondence or printing manuscripts for publishers. However, over the last few years, attaching files to e-mails or sending files via disk has greatly reduced the work done by printers in most freelance writers' offices (in fact, I currently have trouble with the ink drying out in the ink cartridge from one use to the next which — I recently realized — was averaging about four pages *per week* in my office over the last few months).

While the "paperless office" hasn't quite made it possible to operate without a printer, you won't be using one as much as you would have ten years ago. You'll need a printer, but I wouldn't invest in an expensive one unless you really think it's going to get a lot of use.

Laser printers are nice, but expensive. If you need to produce really sharp print (say you're self-publishing or producing "camera-ready" pages to send to a commercial printing agency), then it might make sense to get one. But generally it will be money wasted for most freelance nonfiction writers.

That means the ink-jet printer has pretty much taken over the scene. Currently these carry low price tags, with those selling them apparently making their profits by selling ink cartridges that often cost about a fourth of what the whole printer cost — with a cartridge.

There are ways to get around the cost of these cartridges *if* you are doing a lot of printing. Probably the best is to buy a refill kit and just add the ink to the cartridge rather than buying a whole new cartridge. This will save about $20 in most cases, with about ten minutes of work, making it a pretty good trade-off, even though you'll have some black ink to carry around on your hands for a day or two afterwards.

Some cost reduction can also be realized if you use all black cartridges rather than color cartridges. A few printers have black cartridges available for them with a price tag of $10 or more below that of the color cartridge. If you're just printing out a document with no color to it, then this is a good bet.

When buying a printer, go with a brand with a track record. Currently that's Hewlett Packard, but that could change in a year or so (which is decades, if not centuries, in computer product time). Another key thing to watch for is the sheets a printer will cough out during a minute's time. Some printers give great quality of print but take forever to do the job; you're better off getting a manuscript done in a hurry and not waiting for the printer (and I've even missed a couple of deadlines because of a slow printer — which is no longer in my office). Speed matters in the electronic age, even with printers.

If possible, avoid placing your computer and printer on the same table or stand. If the drives of the computer run while the printer is chugging away, it puts a little extra wear and tear on them due to the vibrations created in printing. I suspect this might create some problems over time.

Software

Once your computer hardware and "furniture peripherals" are covered, you need software to run the computer. There are any number of good word processor programs available, but there are two that are very popular with publishers and many business users. They're WordPerfect and Microsoft's Word. These two also have "filters" that permit reading a wide range of other formats as well as older documents created in previous versions of these two word processors. You don't have to use these — provided the word processor you use can read documents created in these formats (so you can see what your publisher sends you should he e-mail a document in either format).

There are some other very inexpensive "bare-bones" word processors, including freeware programs. These are often much faster than WordPerfect and Word because they aren't loaded with the features added to make these programs capable of simple layout work. If you're only interested in creating manuscripts to send to publishers, rather than actually producing material ready to be printed in its final form, then these might be worth considering. However, they need to be capable of reading documents created in WordPerfect or Word, and ideally able to save in these formats as well. Unfortunately, there aren't many that can handle both capabilities, and that could land you in a bind with a publisher.

That said, there are workarounds if you go with a lesser-known word processor. One is to use a second program like Quickview Plus or others that permit viewing documents produced in a variety of formats. You can then block material and copy the material and move it to your word processing program and save it there. This is a little extra work, but provided it isn't required too often, it makes a practical way to read the

few documents you may have to access in a format your word processor can't read.

If your word processor can't save in the format used by a publisher (and you'll experience this problem even if you have WordPerfect or Word), then there are several tricks you can use. One is to save in a common format the editor can access; for example, if you're using Brand X Freeware that will save in WordPerfect and he's using Word, which can also read WordPerfect files, then you could save in Word format and he will be able to import it into his word processor and read it. An even safer bet is to save files in RTF (rich text format), or even good old ASCII text, which can be read by virtually any word processor (and I've had need to go this route during the last few months when encountering a small publisher using a weird program that isn't too popular).

Currently the trend with both WordPerfect and Word has been toward making subsequent versions of their programs bigger and — according to the advertising at least — better. But for most writers, these "new and improved" programs are simply bloatware, full of features that aren't used and which make the whole thing more confusing to use and slower on all but the fastest of computers. My advice is to pick up an older version of these programs from a discount store (or perhaps even get a few copies from a friend or acquaintance who has upgraded to the newer version). These older programs work as well as the newer ones for most writing projects and are also considerably faster and easier to use.

One final tip: If you go with a bare bones word processor, be sure it has a spell checker. A few are coming out without this feature and I really don't feel this is anything a professional writer should be without. An editor isn't going to plow through more than a few paragraphs of a manuscript from someone he doesn't know if he starts encountering many mis-

spellings. Despite the limitations discussed earlier, a spell checker may help save you from the slush pile.

On the other hand, most bloatware word processors have grammar or style checkers. These you can live without. They're a good idea, but the English language is just too complicated to let these work — at least until someone comes up with a better system of programming them. Unless you need a mechanical friend to give suggestions that will make you laugh (or cry), don't turn on this feature if it is available, and don't fret if it isn't included with the word processor you're thinking about using.

The ability to juggle fonts, change spacing, and other format features are good. But generally, the fewer features here the better, otherwise you can waste a lot of time trying to get the look you want (or finding that the word processor is intent on changing what you have). Remember that as a nonfiction writer, you'll generally be selling your words, not how you can spiff up your manuscript with cute fonts or indents that are exactly 0.458 inches. Simple is usually faster when it comes to turning out manuscripts. And faster means more money in this profession.

After you get your word processor squared away, you'll also need a good browser for hitting the Net. With the wealth of references available on the Internet, there's just no substitute for a good browser program. Fortunately, these are being given away at the time of this writing, with Netscape and Microsoft being the main players in the game.

My advice is to employ MS's Internet Explorer (or whatever they may be calling it when you read this) if you're using the Windows OS. I've seen and heard from a lot of folks who have troubles when using non-Microsoft programs on their computers operating under Windows. The reason appears to be simply that MS has tuned their OS to favor their own programs, sometimes to the point of altering codes that will make

competitors' programs malfunction over time. Yes, you may hate Microsoft and view it as the dark force of the solar system, but my advice is to knuckle under so the battle isn't being fought on your hard drive, with lots of down time while you try to get programs to work.

As with other programs, browsers currently seem headed toward bloatware with lots of bugs thrown in each time a new version comes out. My suggestion is to not be the guy with the newest browser, instead opting for older versions and then operating with them until they're so outdated that they have security problems or trouble accessing the sites you need to reach, due to new types of "plugins" being used at the sites.

Sometimes you'll need to copy sections of Internet pages you're visiting. Often this becomes an operation in itself due to different formats between the browser and your word processor; this is especially true as more and more sites specify what fonts will be used and other formatting. Blocking and copying this material and putting it into a word processor document often results in some strange formatting, hotlinks, spaces for pictures, and other jetsam.

To avoid this, you may wish to block and save material in a text reader that only works with ASCII (such as Notepad or Editpad). This immediately gets rid of much of the formatting you don't want. You can then re-block and copy it and paste it into your word processor document, where it will look more like you want it too.

With most browsers, you can also save most pages as text files (ASCII again). This is another way to "clean up" material that you might later be quoting from in manuscripts you're working on. (There are copyright considerations to such practices that must be kept in mind in order to avoid breaking the law — more on this elsewhere in this manual.)

You'll also need an e-mail program. I'd suggest using whatever comes with the browser you adopt. This will minimize

interactive problems when you're on the Net and make fewer conflicts between the browser and e-mail program. Yes, there are usually better "stand alone" e-mail programs, but I suggest you aim at greater reliability rather than the ability to send a variety of formats, sort through thousands of e-mails, or send out mass mailings — all features you'll most likely never use anyway.

About the only thing your e-mail program needs to be capable of is to accept e-mail attachments so you can send manuscripts via e-mail to an editor. Nearly all, if not all, e-mail programs now available have this capability.

If you'll be working with digital photos, or creating drawings, charts, or other illustrations for your manuscripts, then you may wish to invest in some graphics programs. These are tricky to work with because they require a lot of computer power when you're dealing with material that will remain sharp when in print (usually 200 to 300 dots per inch for print — only 96 dpi for graphics that will only appear on the Web). This dictates a faster machine, more memory, bigger hard drive, and some peripherals such as a graphics tablet and perhaps a 19-inch monitor if you're getting serious about things. In a word: Money. Spelled with a capital "M."

If you're only going with a digital camera, chances are it will come with the software you need. I'd suggest you work with this a while to get the hang of things; it may be that this will be sufficient for your needs.

If you're doing artwork, then you'll need a serious graphics program. Right now all the major publisher's art departments are keyed into Photoshop. However Corel's PhotoPaint and the low-cost PaintShop Pro have both been optimized to work with Photoshop "filters" (for creating special effects) and to also export files in the formats used by Photoshop. And because these two companies haven't been resting on their laurels with assured business from the major art departments of

publishers and the universities feeding printers with staff, both PhotoPaint and PaintShop Pro have better features than Photoshop. So if I were starting out, I wouldn't rule out any of these programs as a possible selection for creating graphics to go with articles.

Camera, Action

Some writers will need additional hardware. If you're interested in writing magazine articles, a camera is usually a must. Often editors won't buy a really well written article if it doesn't have good photos with it; conversely, an editor will sometimes buy very poorly written articles if they also have good photos. No one likes to admit it, but many magazines are more concerned about their pictures than they are with the quality of their articles.

The horrible truth that many editors don't admit in public is that pictures sell magazines on the newsstand. Rather than wring your hands and sob about the poor literary quality of today's magazines, it's better for your pocket book to learn to take pictures to illustrate your articles or books.

Now what camera do you need?

There are umpteen variations to choose from. The 35mm camera has been the one most commonly used for magazine and book photos. Currently, printed photos are still accepted by editors and the big plus of these is that they are cheaper in the short haul; right now the optical camera (as opposed to a digital system) is less expensive to buy, and the pictures less expensive to create because they don't dictate a large computer, digital tablet, and software to juggle the pictures.

On the other hand, the old-fashioned optical camera doesn't permit working the magic a digital system offers: Removing backgrounds, enhancing contrast, adjusting colors, or other

tricks that can transform a mediocre picture into a masterpiece. Digital cameras also permit quickly seeing what you've snapped; you don't get home and discover that the prize picture you *thought* you had captured was lost because in reality your finger was over the lens (don't laugh, it has happened).

Before you run out and buy a camera, you need to sit down and look at prices as well as think about how much you will wish to alter pictures. If you're just wanting to snap and forget, then an optical 35mm camera is probably the way to go (at the time of this writing, anyway). If you want to do lots of alterations and make changes in pictures, then you will probably want to choose a digital camera.

You need a camera that can get sharp pictures. That means a quality optical camera such as a Minolta or Olympus. And get a good lens for it; a 50mm lens will handle most of your photography needs. Don't waste money on telephoto or portrait lens unless you really need them for long range or close-up shots. If you need a "long lens," the "zoom" is the best bet. While not quite as sharp as the fixed lens, and also a bit more expensive, the zoom lens is much more flexible and will give you a wider range of options. (Many photographers find the 75-250mm lens is a good compromise for magazine work.)

If you're going digital, then you need to watch for a system that gives you enough dots per inch for the sharp image a publisher will want in a print magazine. You should also keep an eye on the amount of memory storage the camera has (and perhaps get optional memory chips); storing large pictures requires a lot of memory and it is better to have too much than be forced to discard or omit taking photos when you're on location because you're out of memory.

You'll also need software and cables to move the pictures from your camera to your computer. These will generally be part of the system you buy, but be sure it is compatible with the computer you have, rather than discovering you'll also

need to add an expensive adapter card or other add-on to your system to accommodate the camera.

Generally, you'll get better photos by getting as close as is possible to your subject. Taking photos of subjects in the shade or with the sun toward your back will often prevent harsh contrasts of light and shadows.

With an optical system, use of "400" film will enable you to take most of your photos outdoors in the shade without the need of a flash; "400" or "1000" film will get you by with many indoor photos. (Once you get the hang of things, you may wish to purchase a flash unit — but don't rush out and get one until you're certain you really need it.)

Most modern cameras have auto focus and adjust to light exposures. However, there may be times when you'll want to override these systems. For example, I recently had need to get pictures of stained glass windows from inside a church. The camera kept adjusting to make the light right for viewing objects inside the church — transforming the windows from gloriously colored pictures into blobs of bright light. Without the ability to override this automatic adjustment, you can lose some very spectacular shots; be sure you can turn both the focus and light exposure adjustments off if you need to.

Photos do not have to be large. Many publishers will be happy to use the standard-sized 4x5-inch prints *provided* the contrast between lightness and darkness is good and the features very sharp (and — with digital work — you've got 200 to 300 dpi). If the main object of your picture is even a little blurry, forget it. (The background can be blurry and, in fact, is often better if blurred, since it won't distract from the foreground.)

With many cameras, you'll get a sharper image and have greater focal length when taking pictures in brighter light. That means anything you can do to make the environment brighter when you're taking pictures is going to make pictures

more apt to be what you need for your publisher. The only exception to this may be direct sunlight, which often causes human beings to squint (thereby looking like they were making monkey faces at the camera when you snapped them) or make odd reflections that may go unnoticed when you take the picture — but make it almost useless when you process it.

If you wear glasses, be sure you have them on when you're photographing; Mr. Magoo never produced any photos worthy of publication, except perhaps for abstract art magazines. Also be aware of what's behind your subject. Photos often don't show the actual depth of field; consequently, branches in the background can become antlers on top of your subject's head; an object can be lost in a confusing mess of background brush if you're not careful. Such situations are funny — unless your salary goes down the drain because you didn't get any other photos to illustrate your article. Even with a digital camera such errors can cause a lot of extra work in getting them removed. Watch your background and save yourself some work or even total frustration.

Always take more photos than you think you'll need. Vary the exposure, focal lengths, and backgrounds. This way, if some of the photos don't turn out, chances are others will. Too, if you have extra photos they may be useful for future, related articles (always take care to store photos in an orderly manner so you can locate them later). Since some publishers want to buy *all* rights to pictures, it doesn't ever hurt to have some spares that are similar but different enough to avoid any copyright questions should you write a similar story and need pictures for it.

It should also be noted that many manufacturers will supply photos of their products if you'll be writing favorably about them. These photos are usually of very high quality and can save you time and money. Just be sure to give the company photo credits ("photo courtesy of Brand X Company") and

don't use a photo if you're going to "slam dunk" the product, reveal that it isn't too whippy, or some such thing. (If you do use a company-supplied photo and knock the product, the manufacturer may give you some legal harassment, or even bring a suit against you, claiming you didn't have permission to use the pictures in your article. Take your own photos if you're doing an exposé.)

Whether you're knocking a product or praising it, it's also wise to cover your backside by always getting written permission from a company to use its photos. While, theoretically, a company that sends its photos to you has given you permission to use them, it doesn't hurt to have a written document to back you up if an editor wants to know about it or if a company decides they don't want you to use the photo — after it's gone to the printer.

In theory, if you're doing a news-style article and take pictures of people in public places, you don't need their permission to print the picture. But that doesn't mean you won't see a legal battle. So approach such pictures with care. A better bet is to simply obtain written permission to publish photos of individuals in your articles. While it would seem like most people would be happy to have their face appear in a magazine, a few decide they should have been paid or get mad when they appear in a magazine they don't approve of (say a pacifist in a military magazine or a minister in a girlie publication). In such cases, things can get ugly quickly — unless you've got your subject to sign on the dotted line saying it is fine for you to use the photo you took in the magazine article you're working on.

Most people are more than happy to sign "on the spot." Just be casual about getting a signature and don't give them too much time to think about it or they're apt to decide you "owe them" — even though you don't.

ET, Phone Home

Okay. You need a phone. You most likely have one in your office. How about an expensive fax/phone, answering machine, or some other equipment?

My personal experience has been that you can do without a fax. Yes, agents and editors would like to send me an article from time to time. But usually it isn't so critical that they can't mail it (or better yet) attach it to an e-mail and send it to me. I don't get "junk faxes" from people I don't want to hear from, I don't have to feed the thing with ink and paper, and I have one less bit of expensive equipment to break and be replaced.

When I need to fax (and sometimes I do), I can do so with the fax board in my computer (actually part of the modem — most modems come with this capability these days). Coupled with a program offered by ElectraSoft (3207 Carmel Valley Drive, Missouri City, TX 77459-3068, www.ElectraSoft.-com/) or a similar company, I can create a contract or book proposal in my word processor and then select the fax option in the print mode. The word processor then "prints" the document to the fax board rather than the printer. At this point, I select the fax phone number for the editor I need to send the document to, and click the "Send" button on the screen. Off it goes, no mess and little fuss.

In many areas, it is also possible to send a fax via the Internet over e-mail. This isn't the most elegant of systems; however, some of these systems are free — a price that's hard to beat. A quick search of the Internet will let you turn up some of these services. Provided the person you wish to reach isn't living out in the sticks where such services aren't available, you will probably be able to reach them this way.

Speak to Me

For the last decade or so, there have been companies working on speech recognition programs so you can dictate to your computer rather than type everything into it. Most of these have been nothing short of frustrating to use (and I've shelled out money for these, which I view as a total waste of my time and resources). However, a few of these are now becoming efficient enough to make them worth considering *if* you are a relatively slow typist or have physical problems that prevent rapid typing.

They do take time to "train" to recognize with accuracy what you're saying, and most require that you learn code words to jockey around the screen, open files, or give other commands to programs. If you're patient enough to take your time to train and learn the program, then this might be the ticket.

In theory, people can speak considerably faster than they type (in part thanks to poor keyboard design), so you should be able to realize a great work increase should you be able to successfully set up and use such a program.

My advice is to do some research into which have the best ratings; as at the time of this writing some are considerably better than others — and a few good ones may unfortunately fall to the wayside due to a very small market at this point.

Waste Not, Want Not

Don't worry about the color of the carpet in your office or whether the recliner, computer, and filing cabinet have the same color scheme. Until video phones become commonplace, your editor won't know whether you're living in a luxury suite or working in a threadbare office that appears to have been

furnished by the Salvation Army. (And even if video phones do become popular, I'm betting many a successful author will only "fix up" one strategic corner that can be seen by the camera, rather than waste money for an entire new set up.)

Remember that success should be measured by getting into print and having money to spend on your real needs, not on buying equipment for an office no one is ever going to visit. Unless you have clients actually coming into your home, there's no need to buy impressive furnishings.

Instead get a quality computer that's only as powerful as you really need, some key programs, and other odds and ends. Then go for low expenses and comfort when it comes to filing cabinets, chairs, shelving and other fixtures. Save your cash for what you really need.

The less you spend, the less you need to make. Keep that in mind, and you're half way there.

Chapter Three
Finding Work

Work, like gold, is where you find it. To locate it, you often have to search diligently. That said, after you've been in the business a while, you'll discover the gold comes to you: Editors familiar with what you do will eventually start calling and asking you to do work for them. At that point, you'll be able to spend most of your time writing instead of splitting it between hustling for work and actually doing it. Aim to please everyone you work for, and be willing to take on a variety of work, and you should be able to reach this point in a few years.

Many of the methods of obtaining work outlined in this chapter can also be employed to land an eight-to-five job, as well as smaller writing tasks. And small projects, combined with other small assignments, can create enough income to support a freelancer.

Before jumping into freelancing, it's wise to look at the pros and cons of working at home. The most obvious shortcoming of working at home is the lack of a fixed income. You have to scramble all the time, trying to collect new assignments, meet deadlines, and maintain contacts with any number of old or potential employers. This gets quite complicated and hectic sometimes — and there are months when nothing may turn up, especially if you're starting out. If you don't want to worry about obtaining new writing jobs all the time, juggling bills,

and plotting where you're headed from one day to the next, an eight-to-five job at some business needing a nonfiction writer is probably for you.

Some people also have trouble disciplining themselves to work at home. Or they hate trying to work from home because their spouse and/or kids are always under foot. Or perhaps they miss the camaraderie between office workers (though e-mail and the phone can take up this slack somewhat). In any case, if you're a "people person," then consider landing a full-time job with a large company.

The "loner" or person who enjoys working by himself will relish freelancing. There's a bit of distance between the freelancer and his employers; the freelancer will seldom actually face his "bosses" but rather deal with them over the phone or via letters. Consequently, for those who hate face-to-face dealings or needless conversation (which can waste a whole lot of time), freelancing can actually be less stressful than plodding along at a secure job with the inherent confusion and office politics that businesses seem to generate.

The lack of face-to-face contact also means that a freelancer can "dress up" in sweat pants and T-shirt rather than a three-piece and tie, forego shaving or makeup (depending on the author's sex, hopefully), and wear a hairstyle to suit the individual's whims and tastes.

Few eight-to-fivers enjoy such freedom.

A freelance nonfiction writer can also choose to quit working with anyone he finds disagreeable, with a minimum of fuss. Where quitting a full-time position is pretty traumatic and may mean a major move or some such thing, dropping one contract offer from an outfit you don't like working for is no big deal. This can be of substantial worth, especially for those who find "high pressure" businessman or authoritarian editors revolting.

Freelancers can also devote more of their efforts to actually working, rather than sitting in a traffic snarl when commuting to and from work. While many people don't think about it, just a 30-minute commute to work amounts to an extra hour of stress and lost time per day. That's nearly a day's worth of time by the end of a week. A freelancer can use this period to do something he enjoys at home, sleep an extra hour, or — more productively — by working.

Eight-to-fivers can carry a cellular phone, tape machine, and what not, to try to use some of their commuting time productively. But they'll never be able to use the time as efficiently as a freelancer already sitting at home in his office.

Too, commuting to work is expensive. The cost of keeping even a junker car in running condition mounts, as do gasoline and insurance costs — and most businesses encourage their workers to drive expensive cars rather than junkers (which also makes workers less apt to quit when the job market is tight).

Additionally, there's an added element of danger in commuting, especially in areas with poor driving conditions or heavy traffic; even if a commuter avoids an accident, it's likely that the stress of driving in such conditions will take its toll on your mental and physical health. Spending several hours a week on the road puts you in a lot of danger over time.

Freelancers also enjoy a more flexible schedule. If they need to work late, they don't catch flak from a spouse who wonders what's *really* keeping them on the job so late. Should a child be sick or a toddler be underfoot, a freelance writer can baby sit and still get some work done.

They can also write when they feel like it. The "work day" can start at five a.m. or eleven p.m. Or be broken up into hour stretches followed by hour breaks. On days when the writer is sick or doesn't feel like working, he doesn't have to worry about a boss hounding him for not showing up at work.

Freelancers can even work during after hours, while holding down a full-time job. A few freelancers are also eight-to-five writers! In such cases, freelancing can be a way to bring in additional money where it would otherwise be impossible to do so.

Finally, many of the costs of working at home are tax deductible. Travel expenses, special equipment, reference books, computer, software, etc., etc., are all deductible (whereas a commute to work, buying expensive suits to wear on the job, and other costs are not for the eight-to-fiver).

Perhaps the biggest plus is that if you're writing about things that interest you, your business takes over many of the areas that "regular" people fill with hobbies. The big difference is that your business expenses are tax deductible while their hobby isn't. This can amount to large sums of money in a year's time. (So keep careful records, be aware of what you can and can't deduct, and learn how to fill out your own income tax forms. Taxes are a hassle, but they also offer a way to keep more of your money if you know how to take advantage of deductions.)

Sit down, weigh the costs and benefits of each style of work, and decide which type of writer you want to be, and then work toward that goal. In the meantime, you don't have to make the change overnight; you can work toward it gradually. If you're holding a full-time job, you can try freelancing on the side to see how you like it. Likewise, if freelancing isn't working for you, you can always continue to write but do so part-time and get a second job as a paid employee. Being a writer is not dependent on your being one or the other type of worker.

If you decide to work full-time for an employer, you should realize that the fastest way to gain a writing job is to know an insider in the business you're interested in working for. There just isn't any substitute for this. It's a dirty little secret, but

most announced positions are actually already spoken for. The announcement is made to make it appear that everyone including those who might cry "discrimination" had a shot at the job; this keeps the company (or more often government agency) from running into lawsuits from minority groups or others. But the job was never really open. In fact, someone was already waiting in the wings to sign on the dotted line. And if you know an insider, this someone can be you.

With this in mind, the best way of making contacts within companies, as well as discovering what it's really like to work for a business, is to obtain freelance work with them. This enables you to get a feel for how they do things. You'll also discover the scuttlebutt, how fast of a job turnover there is, and so forth. Doing a limited job with the organization gives you that important inside contact that will lead to actually obtaining the job if you decide you need it. Therefore, freelancing is often the first step to procuring a full-time job.

There're several books that can help you land the nonfiction-writing job you want when you've located a company that interests you. Books that may help you include:

- Tom Jackson's *The New Perfect Resume* (Main Street Books; ISBN: 038548190X, September 1996).
- Richard Nelson Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute? 1999: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters & Career-Changers* (Ten Speed Press; ISBN: 1580080081, October 1998).
- Richard Nelson Bolles's *Job-Hunting on the Internet* (Ten Speed Press; ISBN: 1580080782, May 1999).
- Robert W. Bly's *Secrets of a Freelance Writer: How to Make $85,000 a Year* (Henry Holt; ISBN: 0805047603, August 1997).

- Amanda Boyd's *Writer's Digest Handbook of Making Money Freelance Writing* (Writer's Digest Books; ISBN: 0898797772, March 1997).

There are also a lot of job postings on the Internet. A few minutes with a search engine will generally help you turn up tens, if not hundreds, of companies advertising for nonfiction writers, either as freelancers or for full-time positions. While some of these may simply be postings with someone already lined up (as noted above), many are legitimate openings and may be worth pursuing. While this shouldn't be your only source of job information, it makes a nice auxiliary source for work — and is apt to mushroom over the next few years as more businesses and writers get onto the Net.

As to freelancing, there are many ways to locate jobs. In general, it's safer to land enough small jobs to make one decent salary. This keeps you from becoming dependent on just one or two employers.

At first, you'll want to accept almost any writing assignment that pays; you might even want to do a little non-paying work just to get your name out there. As you become more efficient and better known, you'll want to become more selective. At that point, you'll take on projects that are easier to do and/or pay better money. Remember, the bottom line is having enough cash to support yourself in the style in which you wish to live. If you want to crusade in print, that's fine. But be sure you don't get sidetracked with too many poor-paying projects that support "causes" you're interested in. If you go broke, you won't be doing anyone any good.

Here's a simple rule that will help you regulate your business: When you can't find enough time to do the writing people are asking you to do, raise your prices. If you don't have anyone asking you to write, lower your prices — or even write for free.

It's also important to know when to move on; as you progress, you need to aim for harder markets, leaving the low-paying markets to other beginners. When you start out, you should be willing to work for little or nothing. But don't keep doing that. As you establish your credentials as a writer, start aiming higher so you can become better known — and make some serious money.

Knowing when to turn down a project is as important as bringing in work. If you can't handle the assignment, don't take it; slopping up a job will ruin your chance of ever working for a potential employer and — eventually — the word will get around. Likewise, if a job isn't paying enough, turn it down. If you're just starting out, it can be traumatic turning away work. But you must do this or you'll soon find you don't have time to write for jobs that you're interested in and which pay well.

Be courteous in turning down jobs, even if the assignment seems offensive, the pay is poor, or the subject is something you aren't able to handle because of time or research limitations. Always make it clear that you are interested in future projects and let the person who's presented the offer know they can call you with future deals. Often one failed offer will lead to future work, provided you haven't cut off communications with the person offering the work to you.

It's important to know how to bargain for higher payments for articles or other projects. Generally, it's good to go with the first few offers from a business and then bargain for more money on later projects with the same employer. This will let you get your foot into the door and also allows your employer to see what kind of work you do. Don't be too rigid in bargaining; be ready to compromise or you may end up with nothing.

Often an editor will have a price in mind and if you quote a price much higher than that, he'll turn you down rather than

embarrass himself or insult you by trying to get you to lower your prices. If you're hurting for work, or interested in the job for one reason or another (or perhaps want to get a toe in the door of his publishing operation), then all you need to do is counter his asking what you'd ask for to do the job with "What price range did you have in mind?"

At that point editors will generally say something like, "Well, I thought about paying 2,000 (or whatever he had in mind) for the job." Think about this a moment, with maybe a "Well, let's see...," and then go for it if it seems fair. Once in a while an editor will say something like, "I had in mind something in the 1,000 to 2,000 dollar range."

Guess which amount you need to ask for? The higher, of course. And you'll almost always get it. However, if there's hesitation on the other side, be prepared to back down, as it could be an amount reserved for staff or some such thing. But generally if a range is given, you can ask for the top dollar and get it.

If the price offered by the editor seems a little low, you can generally up it by a little bit. But this is risky and you may have the editor simply reply that the price is too high and politely say his good-byes. So don't try this unless you are willing to risk the job and perhaps even all future work if you're too far off the mark. You can price yourself out of the business, especially with lots of eager beginners waiting in the wings to work for almost nothing. Don't get too lofty of a vision of your worth or you may be the highest priced writer who isn't writing.

Especially when you're starting out, locating writing projects is frequently as time-consuming as doing the actual writing. First, you need to develop several cover letters. These should explain who you are, what writing projects you've worked on, and what you're proposing for the business you're contacting. Create several "boiler plate" letters on your word

processor that can have a company's name and address "plugged into" them and use these for your mailings. This will save time and money while still looking "personal" to whomever it goes to.

You should "name drop" in any letter that introduces you to any editor. The names are of publications you've had your articles appear in, books you've written, or businesses you've produced written packages for. If you don't have any such credentials, then get them by writing in local publications, publications that don't pay writers, or e-zines on the Net — anywhere that will print you, so you can establish the fact that some editor out there thought enough about what you were doing to put you into print. Once you have this, you will be seen as "a writer" and the editor will be more willing to take a chance on you since he knows someone else has done so.

As you get more into print, then you delete the less popular publications from your letter and replace them with the more popular publications or books that you have had success with. As your credentials increase, then so will the number of editors that will be willing to take a chance with what you're doing.

This short list of what you've seen go into print should only be three or four places at the most — don't create a list of 20 or 30 publications as you meet with more success or you'll look like you've been taking bragging lessons. However, you might note that you've seen bunches go into print with something like "I've had 30 articles printed in magazines, including..." and then list the two or three best-known publications.

Use this list any time you contact an editor, whether it is in a cover letter for an article or book that you're submitting, contacting someone about a job, or making a proposal for a book or article. Remember that you're only a writer if you get into print, as far as the larger publications are concerned. If you can't show you've been in print, many editors will prefer not

to take chances (and maybe pick a loser) than try to give a talented beginner a break. This is sad, but true.

One of the first rules freelance writers have to discover is that you should never call yourself a "freelance" writer. This seems to be especially true if you're writing for the computer industry. Instead, freelance writers in many fields are "informational writing consultants" or other such things. (Yes, this is ridiculous, but what do you expect from a culture that calls garbage collectors "sanitation engineers" or janitors, "custodians?" Remember that your goal is to make money; if that means calling yourself something else, jump into the crazy games companies play.)

So you may even wish to expand your freelance operation — on paper — into a business. In such a case, you can have "company stationery" printed. This allows you to become the president of your small firm and, should you need to hire a secretary to help with your overload should things become really good for you, you'll be all set. If you already have a "company," you don't have to revamp your operation each time it grows. Become the "Podunk Publishers Technical Service" or some such thing; make it sound impressive. Sometimes the writing business is involved in selling dreams every bit as much as Madison Avenue is.

You will probably be able to get by creating a letterhead that is coughed out as part of your computer documents. However, if you really are into fiction, then you can purchase stationery with a fancy letterhead printed on quality paper. You may be working in a room that looks like a dungeon while you wear a dirty sweatshirt that says "Writers do it on the keyboard." But at least when you're starting out, you need to give potential employers the impression that they're dealing with someone in a three-piece suit, working out of a high-rise, glassed-in office with expensive office furniture and a crew of manikin-like secretaries.

(Once you've established a track record and have some steady clients, you won't need to continue this fiction. At that point you can dispense with this game because most of those you work with will soon realize you're the Lone Ranger in your freelance operation.)

Since you're supposed to be a writer, any letters you send out should be very polished and easy to read. Use short sentences and try to keep each letter as concise as possible (save such letters so you can use them for "boiler plate" as you contact other editors). If contacting a publisher cold, you may also include a small packet of Xerox copies of any articles you've got into print; this can be included with your letter as a writing sample. (Generally, simply listing the publications you've been successful in getting material in print with will be sufficient if you don't wish to waste money on Xeroxing and postage.)

Don't mislead people about your qualifications. But remember that no one else is going to be lauding your abilities either. So don't be afraid to put your best foot forward and sell yourself when making initial contacts with your letters. (Just take care not to sound like a pompous braggart.)

Finding Your Niche

The nonfiction market has been able to explode through niche publishing. Where the fiction publishers are on the ropes (as this is written) because they've concentrated on mass markets in just a few broad categories, the nonfiction market has exploded with small presses hitting very defined markets. These operations don't sell as many books, but make good money by selling at higher prices to people interested in books they can't find anywhere else.

If you have a specific area that you're interested in writing about, finding the niche market publishers — including those marketing books, magazines, journals, and even Internet sites — will give you a key place to ply your trade. You can generally find these by first locating a Web site or magazine that serves as a forum for the industries related to this market. Once you find this source, you'll soon find the publishers and other companies connected to the market. These companies are your potential employers, with book publishers and magazines wanting articles related to the field, while businesses may need manuals or other materials that require a nonfiction writer to produce.

If you're new to a market you're interested in writing for, be sure to get up to speed before contacting an editor. Become familiar with the jargon of the field, learn who the "biggies" are in terms of hardware and business, and give some thought as to who the readers will be. Take some time to learn who and what the market is that you'll be writing for, so you're up to the task when you land your first job.

Once you've absorbed such information from the publications, you can start concentrating on securing employment. One route is to write for the magazines you've searched through. By writing articles for them, you can make your name become recognized by the firms you might later get work from. If there are any publishers who have advertised books and manuals in the magazines, this is another potential source of writing projects, which you should check into (more on the mechanics of writing books and articles elsewhere in this manual — right now we just want to concentrate on opening up a market for what you write).

Magazines, journals, and Web sites will also often have advertising that may lead you to companies looking for nonfiction writers. Ads may also tip you toward subjects to write about. Examine the ads carefully to see what is selling — and

what is not. Visit advertisers' Web sites and study what all they offer, read their spec sheets, and see if they've reprinted any articles on their site. Often ads and Web pages are a good indication of what readers are really interested in.

If you see a product consistently advertised in a magazine month after month, or which seems to be appearing in most of the related publications, you know that readers are buying that product — and are interested in learning more about it as well as accessories or related products that might be out there. There are many leads for you to follow if you search for them.

Occasionally, you may discover a magazine or, more commonly a company's technical manual, that's poorly written. This can be an opportunity *if* you can diplomatically point out the business's need for a technical proofreader to catch their mistakes. Many companies are concerned about making manuals clearer and easier to use. Such businesses will therefore be interested in hiring you for such work. Just don't beat them over the head with their mistakes in trying to sell your abilities; doing so will put them on the defensive and you'll lose any chance of getting a job.

All of these potential sources of writing assignments should be contacted until you've secured enough work to make a go of it. If you're trying to write technical manuals or documentation for businesses, then you'll need to contact the sales and marketing directors at various businesses. If you're working toward writing articles or books, contact editors. Magazine editors are generally listed on the mast, so you can write to them by name. Just be sure you're contacting the real "boss editor" — some magazines call their writers "contributing editors" or some such thing (they're not freelance writers, remember?).

For those looking for a full-time job, magazines and book publishers are sometimes looking for editors who can also write articles to "fill in the holes." Landing a job like this via a

letter or phone call is a shot in the dark. But if you can handle such a job, it doesn't hurt to take a long shot. You should address your communications to the manager's or publisher's office, spelling out what you can do, and then ask them to keep you in mind if they have any need for your services.

Of course, the quickest way to make contacts is not by letter. It's by phone. Some people do well with phone calls and will have good — and quick — success by taking this route rather than sending letters. If you're one of these people, by all means use your phone.

But most people don't have success in getting writing projects over the phone with their *initial* contact with a company. Generally, you'll discover that the person says something to the effect that, "Yes we're interested, send us a letter. Have a good day." Click. Dial tone. You send your letter and writing proposal anyway and have wasted your time and money on the phone call. If you try a few calls and discover you're among those who have little initial success with phone calls, don't be discouraged, because this is how it is for most people first starting out in the freelance business.

Furthermore, most editors prefer to be contacted by letter rather than a phone call. So my advice is to save the calls for after you get to know the editor very well.

E-mailing an editor is tricky business. A few will act like you've bombarded them with 3,000 Spam mailings; most will treat your e-mail pretty much like a letter.

Only they'll answer it more quickly and are more apt to read your letter than have a flunky read it. So my advice is to e-mail the editor *if* you see his e-mail address listed in a magazine or on the publisher's Web page.

I recommend against sending proposals via fax to editors when first starting out with them. Once you get to know them, and get a verbal okay for doing this, then you can go for it if it suits your style. But don't start out this way because some

editors view their fax machine as a shrine that can be enjoyed only by their chosen inner circle; all others commit sacrilege.

If the business you want to contact is within driving distance, you can also call the appropriate personnel, make an appointment, and drop in to give your spiel in person. That means dressing up and a lot of extra work. But if you have the "threads" and are proud of your good looks, you might as well take advantage of the opportunity. Do be sure the people you see understand that you'll be working freelance — oops — as contract help or a consultant.

Usually, a business hiring you to work freelance will be happy to let you work at home. If there's any hesitancy about this, you can suggest that you work by the job rather than the hour. This way, they'll not have visions of you watching a soap opera all week and charging them by the hour while you goof off.

If there's still hesitancy about letting you work from your home, you might point out how social you are and how easy it is to get distracted with all the office personnel around you (there's truth to this and they'll probably agree). Or you can plead an allergy to the boss's cigar, the new vinyl upholstery, or some such thing.

Once you get started working with a company, you'll have better access to the editor or other key personnel. At that point, you will probably be able to pick up the phone or e-mail them with an idea and get a quick response. But until that time, be cautious with contacts over the phone or by e-mail. Most editors are harried and racing the clock; the last thing they will want is someone who might pester them with endless phone calls or e-mail. So tread lightly when starting a business relationship with a new publisher.

Rejection

Whether you're calling, going in for an interview, or sending out letters, one of the tough things about freelancing is learning to deal with having the majority of your proposals rejected or not even answered. You must learn to live with this situation and let rejections bounce off your skin without creating wounds. Treat each rejection as a personal affront and you'll never get anywhere.

It's always a bit disconcerting to send something to a faceless editor and then have it rejected. But the worst that happens is that they say "no" and send it back. Once you realize that and get your feelings tightened up a notch or two, it isn't so bad (or maybe it's that after a few rejections you get a thicker skin). Just be sure that you send material out and don't let the rejections bother you too much. Because if you don't send stuff out, you don't get into print. The old "nothing ventured, nothing gained" is definitely true for a freelance writer.

Be sure everything you send by "snail mail" in the way of proposals and articles goes with an SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope). Besides showing that you're a pro and know how to show a little respect, this will bring a response back to you. Editors, pressed for time, may decide for or against you by whether or not they have to make out an envelope and stamp it; that sounds ludicrous perhaps, until you realize that some editors have to go through tens, if not hundreds, of proposals some days. Those without return postage may simply be shoved to a pile that's kept for a few months in case some angry writer demands it back, after which the manuscripts are thrown in the trash — many without even being read in some publishing houses because no SASE translates into no time spent with the manuscript.

Also be sure anything you submit conforms to the publisher's Writer's Guidelines (more on these elsewhere in this manual). Again there are publishers that simply return or trash anything that isn't exactly in the right format. That means even if you are the best writer in the world, the editor will never know it because you'll never get past the first step in the process, as some guy opening letters will sort the manuscripts — and yours won't be in the pile headed for the editor's office.

Remember that not everything you send out is going to be accepted at the first place you send it to. Instead, assume that you may have to send forty, fifty, or even a hundred proposals for each acceptance (this isn't unreasonable in some markets — and even a few best sellers have been rejected by scores of publishers before finally making it big).

If you look at rejections as part of the game, they won't get to you. Each rejection is just one step closer to reaching your goal. Continue to search. And remember that even if you don't land a job, your letter will make an impression and may pave the way for future jobs should you contact the company again. (That also means you should never write any publisher off until you've sent them a number of proposals.)

When you get a rejection that comes with a personal letter, you're getting close to pay dirt. Be sure to keep track of these and plan on contacting that editor again whenever you have something that might be suitable for his operation. Editors taking time to let you know it was close but no cigar are also saying that they appreciate what you're doing and hope you will try them again in the future; otherwise you'll usually just get a form letter.

Your first book, article, or manual is the hardest to land a contract for. Usually, what happens, is a budding writer creates his book proposal (or even the entire book), polishes it

until it looks really good to him, and then he starts mailings to potential publishers.

The writer then waits...

And waits.

And finally gets a rejection (most likely a Xeroxed form-letter, and very impersonal). Or he gets nothing at all.

Many potentially successful writers give up at this point and never try again, and therefore never get any work. They give up too early when they might persist and start a successful career. If you ask almost any professional writer how long it took to get started, they'll tell you about tens if not hundreds of rejections before that first "lucky break" came. Rare is the author who sends something off and gets into print with the first try (in a paying publication).

If you're starting, you should remember that an abundance of rejections will normally occur before even the most successful of articles or books finally get into print. That's good, because it winnows the playing field so you have less competition. Provided you're persistent.

So keep sending proposals and manuscripts out, polishing them a bit from time to time as you become a better writer. The secret is persistence.

Rejection letters can be an important source of other information. You may discover, for example, that the person you sent your manuscript to isn't the one who actually read it. In such a case, sending it to the reader, rather than someone outside the loop, can improve your chances next go around. Some mastheads on letters will also reveal other potential contacts in an organization; you may even discover a better "target" for a future submission.

If you can't locate the name of the editor at a publication, a trip to the library reference desk will give you several publications that will list publishers along with addresses and the name of the editor; probably the best is the *Writer's Hand-*

book. Just be sure whatever book you find is current; some publishing companies change editors on an almost yearly basis.

Also create a computer file of everyone you contact with proposals. The file should contain the date the proposals were sent, addresses, etc. If you have a phone number, that should be added, too. You may even wish to key the lists according to what industry the company is involved in, so you can quickly locate similar companies that might be interested in a writing project you may devise later. Back the file up so it isn't lost, and update it regularly.

As your list grows, the information in this file of contacts can become a valuable source of information for you. It can also be useful for tracking where all articles have been sent, so you avoid embarrassing mistakes — like sending the same proposal or article to the same publisher twice.

Finding the publisher isn't always easy. *The Writer's Handbook* and *Writer's Digest*, most likely ready and waiting for you to use them at your public library, are good places to start. However, there are new, small operations starting all the time that won't be mentioned in these sources and some of these small companies pay quite well. Many freelancers would starve (this author included) if they could only work for the publishers listed in *The Writer's Handbook*. So don't quit looking just because you don't find a small publisher that would be interested in what you have to write.

Presently, the only good way to locate these small publishers is to find their ads in magazines covering subjects you wish to write a book about. Visit your local library and/or magazine stand, collect some magazines, and leaf through them, noting the book ads that appear there. Again, you'll need to create a computer file of names, addresses, and phone numbers along with the dates and titles of the proposals you send to various publishers.

Your next step is to mail letters with your book proposals. And wait. Some of the companies you contact will be self-publishers run by an author who's decided to print and market his own books. These guys generally won't have the cash to add more titles to their one-book catalog. But most of the publishers, especially if they're carrying books by more than one author, will be interested in adding more books and will want to see your ideas.

(If you should hit two companies that are interested in your proposal, go with the best offer. Don't try to pit one publisher against the other — you'll just look like a beginner and will create ill will. Editors know how to deal with this; when you contact them and say, "Company X has offered me two thousand more for my book," they just reply, "Then I suggest you take it. Get in touch if you have another idea. Bye." And that's all, folks.)

When you make multiple submissions, be sure to send a polite letter to any runner-ups if you have to turn down their offers. Generally it's better to come right out and say that their offer wasn't quite up to your expectations *and* that you're going with another publisher. If you simply say the amount of the offer wasn't enough, you might get a second proposal. Rejecting that offer might cause some real ill will when the publisher discovers you had already cut another deal with someone else.

Other Sources of Work

If you're in a large metropolitan area, with industries involved in work that you might write about, don't hesitate to contact these businesses for writing projects. One trick you can use with local or other businesses is to search the want ads for companies looking for technical writers. Send such companies your letter and list of work you've done.

The "hook" in this case is that you include a short note explaining the advantages of using contract help (you) instead of hiring a full-time writer. Stress the fact that this will enable the company to avoid having to hire someone to cover their peak workload periods and that they won't have to fool with Social Security payments, health insurance, or other perks they normally offer their workers.

Another source of local work is to check with businesses that place temporaries; occasionally they'll need nonfiction writers. Not only will this give you a part-time job, it will give you a chance to get your foot into the door of businesses which might be interested in hiring you for various freelance projects. Let "temporary" services know that you're capable of doing documentation, writing manuals, and the like, and they may be able to land you some extra work.

This same tactic can be used to exploit businesses on the Internet. When you find companies listed in job search sites, let the businesses know that you're available for writing projects. Haunting Usergroups or other parts of the Net may bring results — though usually these are slim pickings in my experience and often prone to taking you on wild goose chases if you're not careful.

There are several large companies that act as "co-publishers." These companies do nothing but create books and manuals for other businesses. These "co-publishers" receive the subject and general outline for the book and then turn around and hire writers to do the actual work. While many of these projects are handled "in house" by a staff on the co-publisher's payroll, sometimes these outfits hire freelancers. Therefore, if you can locate such a company, it's wise to contact them.

Unfortunately, it isn't that easy to locate co-publishers. Often they have all the writers they need lined up and they generally advertise by direct mail. Sometimes you can locate one

in a roundabout manner by contacting printing companies (who may do the actual printing of manuals created by the co-publisher) or by contacting book companies and asking for the names of their co-publishers. Both methods require a lot of work and often come to dead ends, however.

Just as you pick up leads from magazines, newspapers, or journals, it's also possible to reverse tactics and place an ad offering your services in publications. Want ads will seldom send much business your way (most company personnel are too busy to sit around searching these ads). But a display ad might work. Display ads are expensive, so you'll need to decide how good a potential market is before trying to get your feet wet in advertising.

And, of course, you can do the same thing in creating a Web page, letting it act to display your abilities (perhaps with samples of your writing, a list of what you've seen go into print, etc). The beauty of this is that it costs very little, with many ISPs (Internet Service Providers) letting users have a small amount of space for free. Either do a page yourself (currently there are several free HTML editing programs that make this process pretty easy) or hire someone to do it. Once you get the page together, spice it up with key words in the META tags as well as on the page itself and don't forget to submit the page to popular search engines so it will be indexed right away.

When you're writing ads or a Web page, remember that you need to have a concise description of what you do and also encourage anyone who's even vaguely interested to call or write for more information. Remember that you are not just selling your virtues but also showing why a publisher needs to hire you. That means everything should be from the publisher's point of view, not yours. (For example, instead of telling how well you write, you should point out that your editor will have a minimum of work because you proofread carefully.)

Ideally the ad is a way to get your foot into the door so you can bombard a potential employer with your letter, resume, and writing samples. It doesn't need to do the whole job (though it can come close with a series of Web pages). It must get potential clients to contact you. Write to draw inquires, not actual jobs, and you'll be more apt to succeed with this tactic.

If you're looking for full-time employment as a nonfiction writer, then you need a "head hunter" who tries to connect prospective workers with businesses looking for talent. Again, a search of the Web will yield any number of these companies. The only catch with these is that generally they are pretty shortsighted, wanting to match people to jobs as quickly as possible so they can collect their fees. This means if they don't land a job within a short time, you need to look elsewhere. With many, if you don't get a match right away, you probably aren't going to see any later on.

After you get your feet wet with a few articles, books, and/or manuals, you should also consider working as a "ghost writer" or "co-author." There are several ways to go about such work, including contacting businesses which are headed by a chairman or owner who enjoys attention; offering to help write the autobiography or a book about his business may be all that's needed to get the ball rolling (you will need the ability to put a positive spin on just about any event to hold this job, as a vanity book like this is not going to fly if you make the subject look bad).

With a ghost writing project you will do most of the work while the person hiring you pastes his name on the front of the finished manuscript. Sometimes you will be able to add "as told to" and then your name. If possible aim for this latter position, as you'll have some evidence that you were really involved in the project when you're using it as a reference to promote yourself.

Co-authoring can be the exact same thing. Ideally, however, you would be able to interview the head honcho, taping his statements and then writing the book. Hopefully he or someone he knows would then read through what you've done before the thing went to print — though this may not always happen. Usually the problem will be that upon reading it, all sorts of changes will be required. For this reason it's a good idea to have a contract that spells out how much you'll be paid on an hourly basis for re-writes. That way you can do the job without feeling like you're getting stuck with cleaning up their mistakes or omissions.

When doing such projects you should get a contract and be sure to get money up front before you start. The contract should stipulate that you don't repay that money if your client suddenly gets cold feet. Then you should get a second sum upon completion of half the manuscript, X number of pages, or whatever, and a third sum when the whole thing is completed.

Ideally you would let the buyer do the editing and publishing so you don't have to handle that, which can also get to be a major operation, especially if the company wants the product to be really fancy, have color pictures, or some other feature that can be expensive and time-consuming to produce. Again this is best hammered out with a good contract *before* you get started on the project.

While you're flipping the classified ads of various large newspapers and magazines or cruising the Net, you'll probably find ads like "We're looking for people to write young adult books..." or "We need books to publish..." or such things. These are generally come-ons by businesses that will publish your book — if you pay them to do it. These "vanity publishers" or "subsidy presses" not only are more expensive than if you'd handle the work yourself (more on this in a bit), they also make many grand promises to market your book —

and almost never follow through with them. They also have a habit of running up expenses and doing little if any editing, even though they will claim to have done so. Don't even bother to contact such operations.

Agents

Another way to round up business is to secure a literary agent and let him handle rounding up projects for you. I've never used an agent for nonfiction work and suspect most nonfiction writers are in the same boat. Unlike the fiction market, where an agent is almost a necessity if you are to get into print, agents aren't essential for breaking into the nonfiction market.

That said, an agent might get you more leads if you're having trouble finding work. Legitimate agents will do this for a cut of the money you make (usually 10 to 20 percent). You can find a list of agents in the *Writer's Handbook*, available at most public libraries.

Most agents are based in New York. However, if you're most qualified to write manuals for the automotive industry, then you'll probably do better with an agent closer to Detroit. Likewise, if you're "into" computers, then an agent based near Silicon Valley in California would be more valuable than one in New York or Detroit. Do a little thinking before you start contacting agents.

If you find an agent, get things settled up front as to which of your writing projects he'll be getting his percentage fees from. You should agree only to let him handle a certain type of book, manual, or writing project. Make sure that he understands that he'll not get a cut of any magazine articles or other work you do on your own.

Unfortunately, some agents won't handle you unless you have a track record of past successes. Therefore, don't waste your time trying to get an agent until you've got several works in print.

Pick your agent carefully and ask for references. There are a few agents that make their money by charging reading and rewrite fees — and never actually securing any writing contracts. If an "agent" wants to charge you for looking at your work, kindly say "no thanks" and look for another prospective representative. Agents should make you money, not drain it from your pockets.

Pitching Your Own Ideas

If you don't get an agent, it's still practical to create your own book ideas and pitch them to publishers. This works especially well with smaller publishers or those aimed at very specific markets (and, in fact, that's how this book came to be).

All you need is a publisher and a book idea to peddle.

First you need the book idea to write a proposal for.

Chances are, you'll have some good ones in mind. Frankly, you can't have too many ideas, since some will be rejected by everyone you send them to. You can't just make one proposal, write the book, and then move to a second one.

You'd starve.

Instead you must keep proposals floating about while you keep turning out the books you get contracts for. Until you have publishers calling you with book or article ideas they want you to handle for them, you must keep generating new proposals and firing them off. If you discontinue this, somewhere in the future your "supply line" will dwindle to a stop and you'll spend a few months out of work, struggling to make ends meet.

This also means you'll have to learn to do a little juggling of your time to get each part of your business going. For example, I'm normally working on several projects at once: actually writing a book, collecting research materials and articles for others I have contracts for, and perhaps pitching a few ideas (I do this latter less and less as publishers ask me to write on specific topics for them). Often I also have to drop my work on the book I'm working on to rework sections of manuscripts that the publisher wants changed, proofread final copies about to go into print, or the like. The main thing to realize is that the process gets hectic and you need to keep careful records and learn to drop and then restart projects without losing your stride in the process. This is part of the job and you must be capable of handling it.

If you have trouble inventing ideas for books, then you need to look through the magazines you've collected to find publishers, and check out the subjects being covered in the magazine, what books are being sold, and what's being advertised. See a recurrent theme? That's most likely worth writing an article about or maybe even a whole book.

Are there articles on "how to" do something or other? If so, the basic premise of an article might be expanded into a book about several similar projects. Keep your mind open and do a little creative thinking about similar books or ways of altering the idea or giving it a new slant for your own book proposal.

Some books start out as a series of articles. Keep this in mind. You may want to write a few articles and then string them into a book. The big plus of this is that the articles can be sold to a magazine, then reworked and sold to another publisher as a book. Provided you don't do identical, word-for-word versions of the articles and book chapters (or are sure you can do this on the basis of owning the rights to the articles after they've been in print), you'll be in good shape.

Once you've got a book or magazine idea, you're ready to "pitch" it. When you're starting out, the best way to do this may be to write the piece and send it to the editor. But you can waste a lot of time doing this; and if you're aiming at a limited market you may be left with something that won't sell anywhere else if rejected by one or two editors.

So a better route is to pitch the idea to see if anyone is interested *before* you do any writing on it. While most editors would prefer to see the entire thing, most understand that you can't afford to work that way and will be accommodating, more so as you get more experience under your belt and/or if the publisher is desperate for material to print.

This is especially important to do with books. Try to avoid writing more than a few chapters unless you have a contract for the book. Start with your proposal and if you're lucky, someone will make an offer and ask to see a full outline and some sample chapters.

If no one is interested in the idea, then all you've lost is your postage and the time it took to crank out the letters and proposals on your word processor. Compare that to writing an entire book that no one is interested in and you see how much time and agony this is going to save you. Writing an entire book and having it rejected can set you back by months. Write a proposal instead.

There are a zillion ways to write a proposal. Here's the one I used for the first edition of this book back in late 1980s. This style is pretty stilted. Today I would probably use a shorter format — maybe written like the ad copy from the company's book catalog. But here's what started the book you're reading right now:

YOU CAN BE AN INFORMATIONAL WRITER
(Working title)
by Duncan Long
(address and phone number)

TARGET MARKET: Practically anyone interested in writing for the nonfiction market.

SCOPE: Content of the book can be altered to suit the publisher (because the author has experience writing fiction, it might also be expanded to both markets).

STYLE: The book will be written in a straightforward style with the author drawing from his own experience as well as that of other writers to give the reader techniques to quickly develop his skills and get into print.

SUBJECTS WHICH CAN BE COVERED INCLUDE: Writing for both the book and magazine markets; finding markets (including those not listed in the writer's guide, etc.); the "pitch" for your new book or article; contacting editors (ways to save time and work while assuring there's a market for your ideas); the "hook" (and how it is different from fiction and between the book and magazine markets); writing your own book ad copy (to improve sales and help your editor); how much humor should you use; what "language" should be used; nonfiction doesn't mean "boring"; how to become an "expert" in your writing field.

HOW TO INCREASE THE MONEY YOU MAKE through "plugs" (without compromising your integrity or credibility); how to find good reference materials; thinking up new book/magazine ideas; illustrations that sell books and articles (with the editor as well as the reader); getting free photos for use in books and articles; should you take your own photos?; word processor or typewriter — which is best for you?; recycling your ideas (to get paid several times for one good idea — without getting an editor or readers mad at you); making the most of your time for maximum output; one secret for success: "try, try again"; etc.

COMPETITION: The author knows of no similar book currently on the market; there are several books dealing only with fictional writing but these will not be in direct competition to this book.

LENGTH: The author will work toward publisher's ideal length.

DEADLINE: The author will be able to complete this work within 6 months' time depending on other commitments at the time the contract is offered.

ADVANCE: Because of the time needed to complete the manuscript, the author would appreciate an advance to cover expenses incurred in not working on other book and magazine projects.

As you read through this, you'll see that this synopsis of the book serves TWO purposes. One, of course, is to sell the book. The other, and just as important, is to give the publisher an idea of exactly what will and will not be in the book. This lets him know what he'll be getting and allows him to see whether or not he's already carrying similar books. (The fact that it is similar is not a drawback. If a similar book has been selling well, a publisher may wish to add another nearly identical book to gain repeat sales.)

The proposal also lets the publisher see that you probably have enough of a handle on the job to fill out a whole book. If the proposal seems to be thin on what might be covered, then the publisher may figure you don't know enough and therefore won't be able to deliver an entire book with useful information in it. So be sure to give details about what will be covered and don't hold back ideas.

Undoubtedly you'll be able to develop a better proposal of your own. You might, for example, want to mention illustrations you have for the book or add other headings. And detailing some of the other books or articles you've done, and why you are qualified to write the book, wouldn't hurt, either (in this case the editor knew I'd written other books). But this should give you a general idea to build from.

When I suggest sending such detailed proposals to publishers I'm sometimes asked if this isn't dangerous, if the idea might not be stolen and used by someone else. The answer is "yes" it might be.

But this will seldom happen for the simple reason that the publisher doesn't have any in-house authors. There may be a group they work with, but a publisher will always prefer to have more authors, rather than less, so he can replace any that die, get an inflated head and want more money than the publisher can afford, or fall off the wagon to become the town drunk. So if you've presented a book idea, the publisher has every reason to hire you, rather than give the idea to another writer and hope he can do the job and that, in the meantime, you don't find another publisher who will put you into print — and help sue for the theft of your book idea later on.

All this means you're pretty safe in sending a book proposal to a publisher. (About the only place that I've seen theft of ideas in the publishing business is with fiction proposals sent to movie studios; some of these folks appear to have signed away their souls to Satan and could care less about breaking a few copyright laws or otherwise engaging in unethical behavior — a word to the wise should you branch out into fiction one day.)

Call Ahead

After you get several books and articles into print and develop working relationships with editors, you may wish to add a step ahead of actually sending written proposals. This is to phone or e-mail an editor and ask if the publisher would be interested in seeing the proposal. This tactic doesn't cost much (almost nothing with e-mail) and it does save time and effort as well as speed up sales, which can become important as your writing career progresses.

Now this is important: Never call or e-mail publishers you don't know and don't call if you haven't got at least five books in print and/or umpteen articles. Doing so will waste

your time and may make a publisher angry with you for bothering him without "paying your dues" by having gone through channels for your first books.

When you call an editor about a proposal, it's wise to have a "script" on your desk so you don't stumble around making your presentation. Jot down the topics you'll cover in your article or book, talk about the length, photos, and any selling points such as public interest, competition, or the like. In short, *sell* your idea. Also have the script ready to fax or e-mail should your editor need to show it to his staff or higher ups for an okay.

An added benefit of calling editors or marketing managers is that you'll stay in the forefront in their dealings. Often, if they have a project in mind but no author lined up, they'll think of you and give you a call, asking if you can handle the job.

Some of my most lucrative books have come about when a publisher called with a project, wondering if I'd consider tackling it. Likewise, an editor or marketing manager may like elements of your idea but reject your initial way of working it. In such a case, if you're flexible, you can often rework the proposal in a few minutes of conversation and land your contract.

In either case be as flexible as possible and be prepared to modify your idea to fit the suggestions your editor is giving you. Sometimes even if the initial idea doesn't work, changing the slant, adding a few topics, or other modifications will change a "no" into a "sold." These calls are not the place to be rigid or play the part of a *prima donna*. Stay open to suggestions and keep things low key and friendly, even if your idea is rejected. Remember there's always a tomorrow, so be pleasant even if the idea doesn't fly, and always thank the editor for his time.

Always try to find another publisher for anything that's been rejected. Often it requires years to get something into print.

But if it is well done, you'll often be able to find someone willing to buy it.

If you've sent an article everywhere and no one's interested in it, keep the manuscript *and* the electronic copy. Often you'll still be able to use all or part of a rejected manuscript in your subsequent work. It may take a decade or two, but almost anything you do that's well done will eventually be of value to you.

Even if no one ever publishes a piece you've slaved over, your time has still been spent profitably. The more you do anything, the better you get at it. This is certainly true of writing; the more you do, the easier and quicker it will become and the sooner you'll be getting things into print.

When the Answer Is "Yes"

After you've sent enough proposals, someone will probably have an interest in one or more of them. You may be able to get a contract just from such a proposal *if* you have a track record of having written several books or if you're writing an article. The next step is to write the piece and send it to the editor.

But with books, if you have few or no past experiences in producing an entire manuscript that went into print, chances are the publisher will ask for an outline before he'll make a commitment with a contract.

When it comes time to write your outline, you need to show exactly what you're going to do. As with your proposal, you need to be able to convince the publisher you know what needs to be covered and that you'll do it in a logical order.

Forget the "I., A., 1., a." style of outlines that they teach you in college. No one in the publishing business uses these — except for beginners who don't know better (a group this author

was in for some time!). Today's "outline" might better be called a synopsis and will be maybe a half page or less for an article and three or four pages for a book or manual. This can be a *very* useful tool to get all the kinks ironed out before you launch into a piece. If you can't condense your basic idea into a few sentences (for an article) or a few pages (for a manual), then you need to rethink things.

Time spent on the outline is far from wasted. In addition to landing a book contract, it has an added benefit. If your outline has been carefully laid out, it will serve for the "bones" of your book. You can actually write your book around the original book outline until you have the finished manuscript. This makes it possible to write each chapter by expanding your outline (another advantage of using a word processor).

By way of example, here's a portion of the outline created for the first edition of this book. It isn't being presented as a great gem to be slavishly copied for your own outlines. Instead just look at it as an example that can be employed as the starting point for your own outline. Here's a portion of the book outline that covers the first two chapters:

OUTLINE FOR:
YOU CAN BE AN INFORMATIONAL WRITER
By Duncan Long

Intro

Chapter 1: Getting Started

- Full time or part time? Pen name?
- Equipment you need: word processor, printers, and programs, not spending too much for office equipment
- Should you take your own photos?
- Look at cameras and film
- The hardest thing about writing is writing
- Tricks to get started writing

Don't spend too much

Agents

Chapter 2: Finding Work

8 to 4

Pros and cons of working at home

Pros and cons of working for someone else

Thinking up new book/magazine ideas

Writing for both the book and magazine markets

Finding markets (including those not listed in the writer's guide, etc.)

The "pitch" for your new book or article

Contacting editors (ways to save time and work while assuring that there's a market for your ideas)

Recycling your ideas (to get paid several times for one good idea — without getting an editor or readers mad at you)

Making the most of your time for maximum output

The secret for success: "try, try again"; etc.

If you study the outline a bit, you'll discover that chapter 2, about setting up an office and a look at computers, wasn't included in the outline. That's because a later chapter containing it became too big, so the information became a chapter of its own. Too, I decided that the material needed to appear earlier in the book. Consequently, some of the final book was in a different sequence — but it was all there somewhere. The material was further shuffled when I did this second edition of the book. The same thing happened to other chapters after I'd entered the "heat of battle" that accompanies writing a book or extended manual.

So obviously it's not essential to follow the outline point for point. At the same time, most of the material appearing in the outline *should* appear in the finished manuscript so your publisher doesn't get any shock or demand that you rework your manuscript and include what was promised in the outline.

After your publisher sees your outline, if you're lucky he'll offer you a contract. If you've been writing a while, you should get an "advance" on royalties or other payment, depending on the company. If you're a first-timer, or with a smaller company with a limited budget, then all you may see is royalties generated *after* the book goes into print.

If you're freelancing, once that first book proposal is accepted, the manuscript worked out, and your tome finally in print, it still doesn't get a lot easier (unless the first one is a best seller — doubtful for most nonfiction writers). Each book will be a new struggle, but the struggle will lessen each time, especially after the first three or four books get into print.

After you've got a few books under your belt, things get easier. You may be able to land a contract with just a phone call, a proposal, or an outline. The neat thing about the work at this point in your writing career is you don't waste time writing a manuscript that a publisher expresses interest in and then decides it doesn't want.

Unfortunately, if you're freelancing, you usually can't afford to limit your books to just one publisher. Approaching new companies will be somewhat like starting over for the first time. Even though you may have books in print with company X, it sometimes won't make too much difference with company Y. Consequently, while you're no longer a "rank beginner," you'll probably have to complete manuscripts to get another publisher — which is practically like starting over.

But little by little things get easier. And by the time you hit book number ten (or thereabouts), you probably will have enough of a name that other publishers will start to take notice of you. And you may even be able to sell ideas your main publisher isn't interested in to the smaller book dealers. Eventually, you'll land as much work as you can keep up with — and that's a nice problem to have.

It should be added that the same thing goes on with magazine articles. Once you've started working with an editor, it's often possible to phone him with an idea and get a tentative promise to print the article when it's finished. This saves time, since you know where to send what you've written, and it has a good chance of ending in print. (The catch here is that if the editor doesn't like what you've done, you may be out of luck, especially with highly specialized magazines. But this usually doesn't happen once an editor has made a commitment.) Proposals can be in the same form as for the books; the basic outline listed above will work well, too.

Computerized

Always keep your book proposals, book manuscripts, and magazine articles saved on computer disk or hard drive. If you do this, you'll often discover that parts of previous books and articles can be pulled, reworked, and used in current projects. It's also often possible to create a book by combining several related magazine articles and then adding other material to them. This is a big plus of using a computer-based word processor; take advantage of it.

Another advantage of using a word processor is that you can "crank out" several similar articles once you've done the basic research for one. Care has to be taken with this, however. A case in point happened to me when I first started working with a word processor, and I created a second article around the basic idea of the first.

Although it was word-for-word different, and the illustrations were different, the editor of the second magazine threw a fit when he saw my original article in print. He crammed the photos and manuscript into an envelope (ruining the photos in

the process) and scribbled a note telling me never, ever to send anymore blankity-blank articles to him.

Part of the problem with the editor probably was he'd been peddling my articles as having been written by a Major someone or other — the name changed from article to article — of the Air Force, Army, or whoever was needed in his military-style magazine. Probably he figured his credibility would have been ruined if a reader had seen both articles and put two and two together, seeing that Duncan Long in one magazine was Major Bighead in the other publication. But writing two articles so alike was a stupid thing to do on my part and — looking back — I don't blame the guy (though I hate to see editors mislead their readers that way).

Learn from my mistake. A new article should be *new.* The slant, pictures, and whatever, should be different enough that the difference is easy to spot. If everything looks and reads the same, then you're cruising for trouble. (Out of courtesy, you should tell the editor that you've submitted a similar article to another magazine *and* detail how the two articles differ. This will prevent a panic if he sees the first one in print. When in doubt, don't submit a second article if you can't get it different enough to make a new article. Also bear in mind that, due to publishing deadlines, an article you send *first* may appear in print *second.* Therefore, you'd be wise to give some thought toward warning the first editor as well.)

Don't be afraid to recycle your ideas — or to some extent those of other authors. But don't go overboard.

Another big plus of the computer is that anything you write can quickly be altered and reworked to suit another potential market. For example, a story you might write about dirt bike racing and finding the best model to suit your needs might also be re-slanted as an article about using such bikes in emergencies (for the survival market) or reworked with an eye toward how such bikes might be employed as lightweight military ve-

hicles (for a military or paramilitary magazine, perhaps). You could use your basic research, photos, and so forth, but hit three potential buyers.

The ability to change concepts can be important when you're writing for niche markets, since there may only be one or two publishers in some of the smaller ones. Being able to give a slight twist to your work and then submit it to other markets may be essential to getting work.

Such books and articles are easy to do if the original was done on a word processor. In such a case, the original document on computer disk or hard drive can serve as a "template" or expanded outline. Often you can go through the original and lift whole chunks and ideas that can be used in the sequel. Just be sure to rework and add to the material so your editor and readers don't feel like they've been ripped off.

Time is Moola

Make the most of your time when writing. Go for projects that pay well and — as your career progresses, drop publishers or companies that don't pay well. (Before dropping a company, make an appeal for more money for your services; sometimes they'll agree.)

One variation of recycling ideas is to create a book from an article series. Or make a series of articles from a book. Or create a series of books from an original book idea. All of these are easily done with many subjects and will appeal to a publisher or editor if your original book sold well or your article generated a lot of interest. Remember that if something works, it can serve as the basis for future successes. If you wrote one how-to book that sold, maybe another similar one will, too. (Just look at the *Something or Other for Dummies* series if you don't believe this.)

The nice thing about this system is that readers who liked your first book or article will be interested in reading your next one. Subsequent additions to the series are supported by the reputation (and advertising) of the first one. Furthermore, you can "plug" your other books or articles in the series so new readers unfamiliar with the first entries will be looking for them. In this way, the publications build upon each other.

A variation on plugging previous books and articles you've written is known in the writing business as "placing land mines" in a book or article. Basically, a land mine is a plug for a product. It's a sort of mini-ad that will turn your readers into customers who will buy the products you're writing about. This can help you directly if you plug your own books or publications. It can get you into the good graces of other companies if you plug their products.

Provided you're really sold on the product you recommend and it's good and will actually be of help to the buyer, most readers are happy to see these bits of information. Many readers will actually appreciate the land mines since the "mini-ad" will enable them to purchase something related to the article. Just be sure not to overdo such plugs or to give glowing reports about something that is inferior — doing either will cause readers to lose their respect for you and actually avoid your other works.

Don't ruin your good name.

Which brings us to a final point. Sooner or later someone will offer you a project that you can't (with a clear conscience) do. What this is, and what personal moral limitations you have placed on yourself, is your business. But never take on a project that makes you feel uncomfortable, just to make some quick cash. Sooner or later you'll regret that you did the work, and even if you use a pen name, the fact that you wrote the piece will eventually become known. Don't soil your name, family, and self-image to get a few dollars. In the long run it

just isn't worth it. Turn down the work — something you feel good about having your name on will come along if you've been doing your part to make it happen.

Make the most of your time and work toward your maximum writing output. Don't waste time on the phone or in answering letters that won't be making you money. And when someone rejects your writing proposals, don't get discouraged.

"Try, try again" is a lot of the secret behind success as a nonfiction writer.

Chapter Four
Researching Your Writing Projects

As noted in previous chapters, the two most important things for you to think about in writing are how much money each project will bring in and how long it will take to write it. You must always maximize the cash you earn and minimize your operating and research costs. And you must produce as much as possible in the shortest time.

Sometimes this means asking for more money — and having the strength to say no to a job if it isn't paying enough. Other times it will simply be a matter of learning to research rapidly and write quickly. Remember that for the most part, you're paid by the job, not by the hour. If you can work quickly, then you'll make more money and/or have more time to do other things that are important to you.

To gain enough work to bring in the money you require, you must also be very flexible in the subjects you can tackle. Many people assume that the only way to gain such knowledge is to earn a college degree in the subject being written about or to spend long years laboring in the field covered. These things would help, but they are *not* essential.

Write this in big letters in your mind: *Nonfiction writers sell information, not expertise or experience.* It certainly helps to write about subjects you have first-hand knowledge of and are an expert at. But it isn't essential. You need not be skilled in

actually performing a task or know all the details about something in order to research the subject and find the details and information you need. That then makes it possible for you to write knowledgeably about the subject.

That said, reliable information is the key to doing the work.

Research must also be done quickly. Remember, pay is by the job, not by the hour. That applies to research as well. You must know where to find the information and how to do the research needed to become an "expert" in the field you're writing about in a few weeks' time rather than in months or years. The secret is knowing how to research the subject you'll be writing about.

How to research is actually the most poorly kept secret in the world. Most high school kids get the basics when their English teacher explains how to research term papers. And when you get down to it, most nonfiction books and magazine articles are simply glorified research papers.

Yet most people are completely baffled at how any given nonfiction author could "know so much" about so many different subjects. The answer is simple: he doesn't, but he knows how to find the information and then translates that knowledge into a usable, highly readable form. If you can find the information and can rework it into easily digested articles or book chapters, then you can make a fair income.

The Net

When I wrote the first edition of this book, the best source of information was the library. With all apologies to my friends who so ably helped me in public libraries for years and years, that's no longer the case. Today's best source of information, and the quickest to access as well, is the Internet. If you're doing very detailed technical writing, access to the Net is essential.

As I write this, the Net is a vast wealth of data where you can find, if not answers, at least enough clues and information to guide you to sources that will supply the information you need. These sources may be companies or individuals that can then be contacted for additional help.

More and more, all you need can be found on the Internet. Barring a technological meltdown, that should continue in the future, as more and more material is added to the WWW at rates that stagger the imagination.

There's a big plus of the Internet: Anyone can put material on it. That's also the big minus. Because you have to be careful not to get stung and use information that comes from an unreliable source. Go to the wrong site and you're likely to find "information" that is diametrically opposed to reality.

Many of those in the TV and radio industry, as well as the print media, make a big deal of this. The media outlets bombard us with dire warnings about the Internet and stress that it is unreliable and unfiltered — as if these might be worse than the way most editors slant material that appears on TV, radio, and the print media. (Sometimes this gets humorous, as when TV commentators talk about how unreliable or biased the Net can be, conveniently forgetting how NBC rigged explosives in pickup trucks to show they presented fire dangers, or when the same news division spliced footage together to make the semi-auto AK-47s in the US appear to be more destructive than they were when shooting fruit. And of course, there's ABC, which spliced together footage to make Food Lion appear to be engaging in unsafe food handling techniques when, in fact, the company employees were not. Pot calling the kettle black?)

The point to remember is that, yes, biased reporting is out there on the Internet — and it's also present in print, TV, or other outlets you may access. Never accept anything until you've got enough sources to convince you it must be true. Just because a couple of Internet sites — or news departments

— say it is so, doesn't mean it is. Be wary of data from any source whether it comes from print, broadcast, or the Internet.

In November, 1997, Ted Koppel wrote an essay in *Forbes* magazine bemoaning the sensationalism of the Internet. "Today, anybody can sit at a keyboard and, with the Internet, have access to millions of people," he complained, suggesting that such access was bad because it exposed the public to unfiltered, low-quality material. At the same time, the ABC News web site had such "hard news" items as *20/20*'s "Slave of the Sultan?" and "Barbra Streisand in Love"; *Primetime* had "Satanic Shooter Talks," and *Good Morning AM* was covering "Date Rape Dangers."

Makes you think, doesn't it?

The real problem for Koppel and the mainstream is that the Internet offers a much wider range of views. Unlike print and the airwaves, which are basically owned by a few big corporations, material on the Net by and large is under the control of individuals. It is still biased and filtered, but the spin isn't always in favor of big corporations and the bureaucracies running the world. This freewheeling and often jarringly different array of viewpoints and ideologies on the Net can present you with new ways of seeing things, and often gives information you just can't find elsewhere because it is outside of the highly controlled mainstream. The Internet hasn't been sanitized and McDonaldized.

Of course, the mainstream media has taken to the Web in an effort to keep "anyone with a keyboard" from competing too freely with them. But that's no problem, provided the big guys don't convince governments to censor the Net, or the corporations don't start buying up everything (and neither appears likely or even possible at this point).

Leading to the next plus of the Net: It is practically free. That's because "anybody with a keyboard" is willing to work almost for free to have his opinion heard. Some of these

home-brew sites are useless junk with pictures of "my cat Tubby" and the new baby. But others are full of useful information from hobbyists, small businesses, and colleges and can give you a wealth of data when you're doing your research.

To compete with these high-content, free sites, the mainstream magazines and network programs have gone to the Web with an important difference: Many offer their programming and articles for free. That's taken for granted by many used to the Internet, but is an important point to you as a researcher. Not only can you access the material from your home and quickly search for it with online search engines, it is also free.

Rather than having to go to the newsstand and hope they have the magazine you need and pay top dollar to take it home, or go to the library and hope they subscribe to something that might be of help to you (should you be able to locate it after sifting through various indexes to zero in on it), you can get it for free at your office.

Hard to beat.

Not only that, some magazine articles are even more up to date than what you'd see in the news magazine or newspaper, because they can be updated with almost no expense on a daily or even hourly basis. You can pocket literally hundreds of dollars saved in magazine subscriptions by getting the exact articles you're looking for on the Net. Talk about no-brainers. No wonder Ted Koppel is upset about the fact that anybody can sit at a keyboard and — be competition (while forcing the news guys to offer their material for free, too).

In addition to the danger of false or biased information that you might run into on the Internet, there's also a danger presented by viruses or other malicious programs. You can generally avoid these, but should be aware of them. One "quick fix" is to install an anti-virus program; that's a good idea. But if you take care to avoid sites haunted by "hackers" and those

into the power trip of messing up other people's computers, as well as avoid downloading pornography or boot-leg "cracked" programs from the Net, chances are pretty slim you'll actually run into anything more serious than a page that locks up your system causing the need to reboot.

You should also be very wary of e-mail attachments. If you get a file with an executable problem (with an "EXE" or "BAT" suffix, for example), then opening it is not without its dangers, even if it appears to have come from a trusted friend (who, in fact, may have had a virus take over his mail program to send you a copy of the virus — in that EXE file). My practice is to simply not open such files; to date I've avoided getting "caught" by such viruses, even though I've had a handful arrive via e-mail (which I then forwarded to a virus-collecting friend who often is a source of information on security articles I work on).

Another type of virus uses the "macro" features of word processors. These are trickier to deal with because some editors will send material to me in a word processor format that could contain such files; given that many editors are this side of computer illiterate and only know a virus when it reaches out of the screen and grabs them by the throat, the chances of getting a macro virus are high in such cases.

My solution has been to use a reader (Quick View Plus) to look at these documents, rather than my word processor. This permits seeing the data but prevents having a macro virus take over, since Quick View can't execute its commands should it be lurking in the document. If I need the material, I then block and copy it and place it in a new word processor file, and delete the original of dubious origin.

Again, using this tactic, I've been able to avoid having any viruses "get loose" in my computer, even though it is highly likely that some have been sent to me via e-mail attachment.

Since some viruses will damage data on your hard drive, it never hurts to play it safe when a computer virus might be present, waiting to do its worst. As paranoids know, there really are people out there who would like to hurt you.

Reliability

If one of the catches with the Web is that anyone can put up information, how do you judge whether or not the material you find at any given site is reliable? The answer is you can't. Not totally. But that's true with any source of information — just read all the retractions that large papers and magazines print (and those are the mistakes that they *admit* making). Many people have grown accustomed to thinking that the Associated Press or whatever source of information is always without fault. They may have a very good track record; but operations run by human beings will always have a slant, spin, or downright errors. How do you spell C-O-L-D F-U-S-I-O-N, for example?

The old standby of the past, that a journalist should have two or three reliable witnesses before writing a story also goes out the window. You might, for example, discover a story that claims so-and-so invented the light bulb before Thomas Edison did. You might find that story on a bunch of sites, some of which copied the story from each other. Some of these sites might be run by people who claim to work for electrical companies or General Electric. Do you run with the story? Use quotes from the pages?

Well, you might. But before you call your editor and have him stop the presses for your late-breaking discovery, you'd need to do some "checking around." Sources only supported by a few Web pages, especially those making outlandish claims, should be checked carefully.

How do you check them?

One way is to compare the credentials of the site to those claiming otherwise. For example, I would put a lot more credence in a quote from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s site as to who invented the light bulb than I would from a worker at a power plant in Podunk, Arkansas. On the other hand, if I did a little digging and discovered that Time/Warner had hired the guy to write a book, *The Story of Electricity*, then I might change my tune. But I would only do so after making darn sure that Time/Warner had done this *and* that the guy claiming to be the author really was, rather than someone who made a site and claimed to be the author but was not. (Are you seeing how many possibilities there are for faking people out with the Web?)

Sometimes you'll come to a page that seems to have credible information. Yet it seems a little off the intellectual beaten path. One way to weigh its value in your mind is to find out what else is at the site or linked to its pages. For example, if we found our electric bulb article at www.unp.com/stories/electrical-power/lightbulb.html we could go up to the small address window that's on most browsers, and cut off the "lightbulb.html" from the address above and hit "Enter."

This would probably take us to a list of other articles in the "electric-power" subdirectory at the site. If these articles looked on the level, then the site would gain credibility in my mind. On the other hand, if other articles dealt with "Alien Power Sources" and "How Ancient Egypt Had Electric Lights," I would have serious doubts.

We could continue to delete the tail end off the address and hit "Enter" to go farther up the chain of material at the Web site, seeing how credible other sections were. Finally we might go to the route directory at "http://www.unp.com." If this turned out to be the United Nations Power committee, then it

might gain some reliability in my mind (provided it was a legit UN organization — something else I would check). On the other hand, if UNP stood for the United Nazi Party I would lower the reliability factor into the negative number range.

Or if the site belonged to the Ukraine National Power group and the article claimed that a Ukrainian invented the light bulb... You get the idea. Might be some bias there. (And all due respect to the real www.unp.com if there is one — I made this up for demonstration purposes and any resemblance to any site, living or dead, is purely coincidental.)

Checking the link page at a site can reveal a lot as well. Does it link to areas that sound dubious in their outlook on things? Is there a specific religious or political bent that might influence the spin on articles? Links can tell you a lot.

Just as you wouldn't believe a witness that seemed a little "off," so too, you must take pains to weigh the reliability of information sources. It is better to take a little extra time checking your sources than getting a story done in a hurry and being the laughing stock of your editors and profession the rest of your life.

Speeding

When starting out, you'll find getting to a spot on the Net with useful information is a little tedious. Once you discover a useful site, remember to "bookmark" it on your Internet browser so you'll be able to return to it easily whenever you want. That said, after you use the Net a while you may find your bookmarks aren't as useful as you thought they would be; nevertheless it is wise to bookmark any page you might need later when you discover it.

However, if you're not careful to keep bookmarks organized, they can become a confusing jumble of site addresses

that are awkward to use. To avoid this problem, try to categorize (and even subcategorize) sites in your bookmarks with files named "News," "Health," or whatever categories you are interested in and may one day be writing about; it is wise to add sub-files for sections that get big. This will save a lot of time in wading through the hundreds of bookmarks you'll probably accumulate over a short time. By presorting your bookmarks, you'll have a lot less trouble finding the key source quickly when it is needed.

Getting organized when you start is slower. But after it's done you'll really be able to speed from one source to the next to quickly gather the information you need. This can be a big plus — especially if you're pushing the deadline on a rush project.

Most browsers permit rearranging bookmarks. Take advantage of this to rearrange things from time to time to keep your bookmarks manageable *if* you find yourself using them a lot (you may not need to do this if you discover that search engines seem to get you where you need to be).

The main thing is to remember to bookmark a site you like when you visit it. Then you can return to it without a big hassle in trying to find it.

Hopefully you'll have a cable modem or other high-speed connection that makes the World Wide Web less of a wait and more enjoyable to use. But if you're on a slow connection (say in a motel where you're on-site working on a story), then there are time-saving "speed tricks" that can take a lot of the wait out of your efforts.

Since you'll often be concerned with getting your information from words rather than pictures, graphics often only serve to slow the downloading of pages to your browser. Worse, often the graphics slowing the download are mediocre and unneeded, or advertising that you could care less about.

Fortunately, there's a real simple solution — and one many web surfers are unaware of or forget to ever use: Turn off the graphics. This will greatly speed the process of downloading a page. Once you've turned off the graphics on your browser, you'll still be able to view the text at sites, but your browser won't attempt to download pictures automatically. That means you'll be able to visit and read information 50 to 75 percent faster than before. (If you want to see a picture, you can still do so by right-clicking with the mouse on the outline of where the graphic would have been; choosing the view graphic option permits seeing that one picture.)

Another speed increase can be realized by opening links in new windows. This is done with most browsers on PCs by right-clicking and then selecting "open in new window." (I am not sure this can be done with Apple computers — but I'm guessing it can through some special incantation known only to Mac fans.) The plus of this is that often you'll find a link you want to follow, but are currently reading an article. Opening the link in a new window and then toggling back to where you were (usually this is done with Alt-Tab) permits continued reading *while the new window is downloading.* This means when you go to the new window, the text and even pictures will be there waiting for you.

Most people discover that they're able to read through material — with the graphics in place — as fast on a slower modem as with the very fastest systems, by using this technique.

The Right Place

There are a variety of places serving up information on the Net. Recently one type of very useful site I've discovered is an "online newspaper" that simply links to news stories from a variety of actual news sources, often adding a short synopsis

of what is to be found in the story (often highly slanted to the page builder's political point of view). The neat thing about this is that you have someone creating this site by doing all the searching for stories that relate to the slant of the site. Provided the guy doing all the work is interested in what you're needing information on, you have someone basically sifting through all sorts of news sources to do your research for you. For free.

I've found several of these over the last few months and — while I would have found about half of the stories using the right search engine — there were a few obscure stories from good sources that I would not have found without very lengthy searches. So by haunting these news conglomeration sites, I was able to rapidly collect the stories I needed over several weeks' time while working on this specific writing project.

Additionally, the stories were brand new, making my manuscript as up-to-date as possible. This is a real plus for publishers, since that means the book will be "current" longer, so it can remain on their list for a longer period of time — also a plus for me since I'll be getting royalties longer without having to update the manuals.

Chances are you won't have the luxury of finding such sites very often. In most cases you'll zero in on the Web pages you need with a search engine of one sort or another. Currently the best engines are still based on the Internet. However, several companies have been working on programs that work on your computer, collecting page sites (or even downloading pages), deleting duplicates and dead links. Eventually, some of these programs will mature to the point that you'll be able to type in your key words, let the computer connect, and then go out for lunch while the system collects the pages, puts them into useful order on your computer, and has everything waiting for you when you get back and go to work.

Hopefully that option is available to you as you read this. If so, you may want to skip the next few pages and count your blessings of no longer living in the dark ages of search engine usage.

If you're not quite there yet, then read on. And you can still count your blessings, because we now have search engines that go through other engines, collect the Web addresses, get rid of duplicates, and present everything on an easy-to-read browser page. Some of these are very good and it may be that they'll continue to improve and make the on-board program outlined in the previous paragraphs a non-viable operation. Time will tell.

In the meantime, using one of the multi-search engines rather than a single search engine is a pretty good bet for quickly finding what you need — and remember that your goal is to work quickly, quickly, quickly to rake in money and have time in your life for other things, regardless of how much you may enjoy your job as a nonfiction writer.

Of course, if you're looking for data on a specific company, you may not even need a search engine. In such a case, simply typing in the company's name in the address/location bar at the top of most browsers and then hitting "Enter" will often take you directly to the company's Web site. If you only need data on products, product names, or company officials you might contact for an interview, then this is a quick trick to employ.

(I should also note that I have created a search engine page on my own Web pages that permits submitting searches from any of a variety of search engines from one Web site. I had so many friends requesting it for their computers that I finally placed it on the Web — and many people now use it as their home page. I keep it updated with what I think are the best engines (putting them toward the top of the page) along with a

few plugs for the work I'm currently doing. You can access this page at: http://duncanlong.com/links/search-engines.html.

The Right Stuff

If you're not careful, you can get a lot of "junk" in your searches. Having to wade through this wastes time and often gets so frustrating that you get into a hurry, missing key information you might otherwise have noticed.

For example, if you were working on an article about breast cancer for a health magazine, you might go to a good multi-search engine site, type "breast cancer" in the allocated space, and hit return.

Surprise. You got *lots* of trash, including pornographic sites (from the first word in our search phrase) along with arguments about why the Net shouldn't be censored (because some programs to keep children off pornographic sites will also keep users from reaching a site about breast cancer). Typing in just "cancer" gets rid of the porno sites, but now you have hundreds of thousands of pages to sift through — equally bad from a search standpoint. Either way, you get so much junk it obscures the gems buried in the rubble.

Fortunately, there's a lot you can do on your own to get what you need. And it isn't all that hard. First you need to narrow your search as much as possible to get just a handful of hits rather than tens of thousands. One way to do this is to go to a search engine devoted only to medical subjects (and you can find this by searching a standard engine for search engines dealing with health topics).

However, you can also use a regular search engine to find what you need — or at least get you into the ballpark of pages with links that will take you to what you need. While some search engines automatically link together words entered into

them, not all do. That means they may give you hits for any page that has just one of the two or more words in your phrase. Thus, in our case above, some search engines would give you articles that deal only with cancer or breasts — but not both subjects in one article. Thus you're getting a huge percentage of stuff that is useless.

But put the whole phrase in quotation marks, and most search engines will look for all the words in the quotes. Thus, you might get pretty good results with many engines by putting in "breast cancer cure" — inside quotation marks. Then you'll narrow your search to useful limits and also get rid of many of the porno sites and so forth. Additionally, instead of just stories of people getting breast cancer, you'll be led to stories of people who were cured (or think they were) by one form of therapy or another.

Often this will be enough to get the facts you're needing with a quick search of your favorite search engine. It should be noted that a very few search engines dictate having an "and" or + (plus sign) in front of (not just between) words to link them together as a phrase; others don't require this. Most have adopted the convention of using quotation marks to dictate a phrase, or the appearance of all the words, before the engine will create a "hit."

If you're in doubt, just use the quotation marks around your words or phrase. But if the results don't seem quite right, try adding an "and" in front of each word to connect phrases. In our example above, that would mean that you'd enter "and breast and cancer and cure" before mouse clicking the submit button.

Also remember that you can add key words to a search after the fact, either to narrow the search of material you have or (more often) to simply do a new search with more words. For example, if you get too many hits, you then refine it with more words — all in quotes — or if the option is available, select

"narrow your search," to sift through the results you received from your first key word search.

Computers are faster than people in searching for information. That means by refining your search, you will save time (money, money, money — remember?) by letting the search engine do the work, rather than sorting through all the different articles page by page yourself. Always let the search engine do as much work as it can for your search. Until your search is coming up with just a handful of pages, it probably needs to be narrowed (or you need to try a different search engine).

When exploring a list of likely pages, don't forget the trick of opening a page in a new window by right-clicking on it and selecting "open in new window." This will permit you to toggle back to your search list (Alt-Tab in most Windows systems) and continue looking for other articles that might be of interest. After you've finished opening all the possible links this way, you can then toggle through them with most of the pages already downloaded so you don't have to wait for them to download. (A few new search engines already open pages in new windows, so it may not be necessary to right-click on some search results.)

Be sure to capitalize all proper names when creating your search words and don't make caps of those that shouldn't be. For example, some search engines might take you to the IBM site if you capitalize the company's name; "ibm" might yield no results — or take you to Miss Wilson's 4th Grade class project about their new computer "ibm komputor" and Web page.

If you have a list of names, separating them by commas may help with some search engines. Words which must appear together should have quotation marks around them with most search engines.

Some engines will note the percentage confidence level rating of each site. This is determined by a number of factors, including how close the search words are to the top of the page, whether the search words are in the title, and whether more of the terms appear in the document. Obviously, if the percentage of the confidence level drops below 75 percent, you'll most likely discover that the pages have little or nothing to do with what you're looking for.

Many engines have an expert search section that gives you greater control over the operation; these permit "pipe" searches and "logical" qualifiers like "not," "and," and so forth. If these are available, they may be a great help, though frankly the newer multi-engine searches do pretty well without this option in locating what's needed; it seems likely that this option may vanish from all engines as it already has some. But if this option is available, it might help — or might not. It merits experimenting with if it is available, however, since you might be able to fine tune your search.

Some "search engines" aren't technically search engines. Rather they're giant index systems that group pages into categories, narrowing the groups into subcategories. These can be ideal if you're looking for a group of things, say everyone who likes Star Trek conventions or where the nearest dealer of some product might be to you. But for many searches, I find these sites less than ideal (though this may just be a personal quirk).

Among these are Yahoo, Alta Vista, and Open Text. They don't operate exactly like the other search engines, but are close enough to make most searches quick and easy. If you need a very specific category or group, then you should take a few moments to read up on the "power searches" offered at these sites, so you can really zero in on what you're looking for quickly.

A few index search engines have been created which don't use search words. Instead they present the user with indexes that are narrowed by choosing ever smaller groupings. You might want to explore this system if you find it tough to think up search words that work in taking you to what you're looking for. The big catch to all the index search systems is that they're hard to automate, making them expensive to build and maintain and hard to keep up-to-date. However, they have a more intuitive feel to them for some types of searches and often give very precise results if you give consideration to each step in the winnowing process of selecting which branch of smaller groupings you want to move to as you narrow your search.

One last group of indexes should be mentioned. Many groups, businesses, and government organizations have FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions — pronounced "facts"). Often this will provide information you may find useful, especially if you need background material or your editor wants a sidebar to go with your article. Of course, one way to find these is simply to type "FAQ" in your search word list. There are also a few search engines that specialize in this — though I wouldn't be surprised if they're dinosaurs by the time you read this.

Internet Gossip

There's another type of engine that searches newsgroups rather than WWW pages, which I have found very useful from time to time in locating information, as well as finding "dirt" on companies who are creating poor products, have bad customer service, and so forth.

The Usernet (also called "usenet," "usergroup," or "newsgroups" among other names) are sections of the Net where

like-minded individuals get together to exchange information, gossip, and so forth. They're sort of a cross between e-mail and chat rooms.

These groups generate a terrific amount of short exchanges, most of which are inane or simply questions, but a few of which can have real chunks of gold in them. They also have scuttlebutt and insider hearsay that no one would dare print or even put on the WWW for fear of a lawsuit. (It may be that this latter feature will eventually end in the demise of these groups should companies start bringing lawsuits against those operating them.)

User groups cover all the bases imaginable. If something could interest anyone, no matter how bizarre or offbeat, chances are there's a user group somewhere to discuss it. Some can be a lot of fun; others are mean-spirited.

The catch is that exploring any of these as they're in progress can be a terrific waste of time. Often the subject line of these gives little clue as to what is in any given message and most are simply nonsense, jokes that have nothing to do with the subject normally covered by the group, or other useless information — sort of like e-mail run amuck after being taken over by a roving band of juvenile delinquents. Separating the good data from the trivia by simply reading through it is a study in frustration. Normal conversations and the responses they generate are usually something like:

- Message 1: I hear there's a new computer coming with a 20,000 Mhz chip.
- Message 2: Wow!!!!
- Message 3: I want one!!!
- Message 4: Me, too!!!
- Message 5: There's no such thing. You guys are all a bunch of *** if you believe this hogwash.
- Message 6: Who are you calling a ****? You're the ***. And your mom wears combat boots.

Actually, in fairness to those generating such messages, often they don't reach this high level of intellectuality. And to get each jewel, you would have to open each separate message to read it, since the heading of the first will be something like "New Super Computer," while each thread will simply be "RE: New Super Computer."

Yet occasionally there's hard information in a user group that you won't find anywhere else. But the trick is not to monitor them in real time, but rather use a search engine that does this. This lets the computer go through each message and search for key words. You then are presented with a list of messages that will at least contain the information you are interested in — including those that don't have a hint of such data in the subject line.

Best of all, you can go back for years in your search, because these records are among the oldest of "Net traffic," having been stored as tape backups by ISPs (Internet Service Providers) for years to prevent catastrophic loss of data; those tapes were saved with the newsgroups information stored away as well. Now enterprising companies not only offer you current material from user groups, but have search engines that search this old data from backups as well, giving you access to years of opinion, gossip, and insider facts.

This data can be especially useful for finding rumors about how companies are doing and the like. It is also excellent for seeing how well products perform and how reliable they are, what businesses give good service, and what new businesses may soon go into operation. In such cases, these groups are a virtual consumer advocate's — or industrial spy's — dream come true. And you can mine it with a search engine.

While it may not be current, each entry will also have the e-mail address of the person who made the posting. That means if you're working on a story that needs some quotes or other

information that person may know, you may be able to simply send some e-mail to that address and ask your question.

Of course, you need to approach strangers with a little tact, explaining what you're doing and apologizing up front for taking up their time, etc., then diplomatically asking your question. If they don't reply, take the hint and don't bombard them with another missive.

There are several search engines that do this. DejaNews (http://www.Dejanews.com/) is the oldest. Dogpile currently also offers a multi-search of three engines that search through old user group messages.

There are also list server groups that give similar results to user groups in terms of information. However, these are posted via e-mail. That makes the information harder to get. However, there are a few list servers that can be searched, making them a smaller, but sometimes significant secondary source you may wish to check.

Specialized Search Engines

There are also specialized search engines used by various universities and professional groups, as well as online encyclopedias, dictionaries, and atlases and other special collections of electronic documents that can be accessed via search engines. Often this information will not be accessible by standard search engines dedicated to the WWW (though I wouldn't be surprised if eventually this all overlaps).

Most of these are available for free just like the major search engines; only a few require fees or are password protected. Here are some sources available as this is being written; I'm guessing that some of these will change, be gobbled up by other businesses, or change addresses, so apologies where due

if this list is a tad out of date when you try some of the addresses:

- Refdesk.com (www.refdesk.com/facts.html) has a bunch of online dictionaries, almanacs, and other reference materials.
- The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (www.britannica.com/) offers its vast warehouse of information online.
- Calculators Online

  (www-sci.lib.uci.edu/HSG/RefCalculators.html) offers a collection of math, business, and various other "virtual calculators" that can be handy for some projects.
- The CIA's Factbook

  (www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html) has background information, including population, major exports, etc., on about virtually any country in the world, including maps of the nation. Since these are produced with tax dollars, the material can be reproduced without breaking copyright laws.
- Switchboard (www2.switchboard.com/) is useful for locating people or businesses, searching for them by name or by other data you know about them. This can be useful for locating contacts or otherwise tracking down people.
- Whowhere (www.whowhere.lycos.com/) does the same thing to locate e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and personal web pages; enter a name and if they have an e-mail address, this engine should find it.
- IBM's Patent Search Engine

  (patent.womplex.ibm.com/boolquery.html) permits searching through patent pages for the last couple of decades (or more). This can be useful if you need a rough idea of how

a piece of equipment works, or need to know who actually invented it.

- You can search the American Medical Association's collection of journal articles (www.ama-assn.org/search/search.htm). Some of these are closed to anyone but members, but others are not.
- *Science* magazine (www.sciencemag.org/search.shtml) is another useful source of science information; it has a huge archive online.
- Elsevier Science News (www.elsevier.nl/homepage/search.htt) has a good search engine for science articles.
- *Thrive* health magazine (208.229.231.93/health/) has a search engine of its articles.

There has been work toward creating what is known variously as an "agent," "assistant," or "robot" that would act like a search engine but would operate as a program on your computer. In theory you'd tell it what to look for and then it would go to the search engines, collect groups of pages, get rid of duplicates or addresses that are no longer up and running, and then give you a list of the best places. Sounds good, and it may happen. But I suspect most pros will continue to use either Web- or computer-based search engines not unlike what we're seeing today for some time into the future, with "home users" going for a "computer friend" to do searching for them. (I would bet that such "agents" were more of a passing idea than anything we'll see in the future — but I may live to eat my words.)

The Internet is a growing treasure trove of information. Be sure to explore it and keep an ear to the ground to stay abreast of new search engines or other assets that may make it easier to glean information from it.

It should be noted that some encyclopedias and other large reference books are available on CD or DVD. These can be very useful, though they seem to be in the process of being displaced by online counterparts. Nevertheless, you may find some of these useful to purchase, especially if you can find them at a reasonable price. (One trick you may be able to use with some of these is to copy the disk to a large hard drive so the material can be accessed more rapidly — provided the manufacturer hasn't created a program to make it impossible to copy a disk this way.)

Madam Librarian

A library isn't as fast as the Net. However, most libraries offer Internet access (which can also give you access to e-mail if you use an online service that can access e-mail accounts from the WWW). This can be a plus if you're on the road; go to a public library and you can get to the Net and your e-mail without having to carry a computer along with you.

Libraries may have access to materials that you can't yet access from the Internet. If you're looking for more than a thumbnail sketch of a famous person, for example, going to the library might yield an entire autobiography rather than just a Web page or two. Likewise some magazines and newspapers that you might need to access don't yet have online presences — or (if they do) don't have searchable archives. In such a case, getting the actual copy of a back issue at the library can be a life saver.

Some large companies, newspapers, and publishers have their own libraries. These may be a source of in-depth material that won't be available from other sources and may be very useful for gaining information for current writing projects you're doing for such operations. The owner of a business, es-

pecially if he is the founder of it, may also have a private library that he may give you access to; again this can be a source of books not readily available elsewhere.

If you're working in-house for a publisher, they may have a researcher who will do much of the work of collecting documents for you. This can be a great time saver and you may also gain material you wouldn't have found on your own. Many publishers will also have a stock of photographs, some of which may be culled for use in an article, thereby saving you more work.

Another resource that many people don't know about are the national depository libraries. University libraries in this system receive many of the thousands of books printed by the U.S. federal government every year. Many of these will have the hard facts you can't find anywhere else *and* the material isn't copyrighted. You can lift charts and information directly from the government documents. (Some of the newer material in these depositories may be accessible via the Internet, but older and often very useful documents are not.)

Many of these national depository libraries are connected to local libraries by the inter-library loan program. That means to get a government document or book all you do is call the university's library, have them locate the book or manual you want, and then give that title and number to your local library. They'll contact the repository and have them mail the book. When it comes in, the library calls you and you go pick up the book. All this takes only several days and your charge is the cost of the postage to send the book (which is usually quite cheap since the books are sent via special low library rates).

Librarians at the public library reference desk are another "asset" you'll need to employ regularly. They'll be able to steer you to the right books or data banks and will also be aware of special reference books that may have just the information you need for a writing project; they will also be able to

help you if you're new to the Internet — and may have access to data banks that require subscriptions to access. (If you find yourself using the help of the reference desk librarians a lot, be sure to shower them with praise whenever they help you. And don't be above "bribing" them with gifts of chocolates or other goodies for their past services.)

A good library will also give you a wide array of encyclopedias (general as well as geared to specific lines of endeavor) and other reference books as well as books and magazines about various subjects. While many of these are now available online, not all the online sources have complete text or, if they do, won't have the illustrations that go with them. Sometimes this can be an important feature, especially if you need pictures for an artist to create graphics from. In such a case, having access to the actual print material is superior to the online version.

Most city libraries now use an "online catalog" for their books rather than the older card catalog of the "dark ages" a few years back. These can be worked like the old-fashioned card catalog to allow searches by author, subject, or title. Their big plus is that they're often tied into other libraries so you can locate books in other libraries that can be borrowed via interlibrary loan. Too, if the book is checked out, it will be noted on the book's "card" in the computer. This keeps you from going on wild goose chases in the stacks.

Back Issues

When researching for job markets by going through magazine articles and the Internet, you'll probably discover several publications which have information that might be of use in your subsequent writing projects (especially if you're specializing in one specific area). If back issues of these magazines

are available at a library (either as the originals or in microfilm form) they will be a tremendous asset. While some of these may be available on the Internet, they'll be missing one important item: The advertising. Often advertising can give you a "history" of products that are no longer available and serve to fill in gaps of information. As such, the actual print versions of publications can be better than online archives that have only the articles but no advertising.

If the library doesn't subscribe to the publications and they aren't available online, then you might wish to start subscribing to some of the journals or magazines to keep up to speed on what's going on. For example, if you find that you're writing a lot of health articles, then you might wish to subscribe to some of the health magazines where you often discover the reference material you use in writing your articles. Just take care to subscribe only to enough magazines to cover your subject; if there's an overlap of information, you may wish to drop your subscription to one or another of the publications.

Be sure to save the back issues of these magazines, newsletters, or what have you, as they will often have information you will need for future projects. Don't get carried away with house cleaning and do away with a potential source of invaluable information; I have done this and lived to regret it (even though my office looked a lot neater).

Of course, finding *the* article in a stack of magazines can be a real headache. Some magazines and newsletters will have a yearly index issue. Keep track of these and keep the magazines in order so you can use the index easily. Some major magazines are also listed in the *Business Periodicals Index*, *Magazine Index*, *Public Affairs Information Service*, *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Social Sciences Index*, *Ulrich's*, or similar publications found in most libraries; if the publication you're interested in is listed there, then these can

be useful for searching your treasure trove of magazines — as well as publications in the library itself.

With many magazines, you'll find no yearly index or other publications to help you. Often, this will mean you'll actually have to wade through the index of each magazine to find any pertinent articles dealing with your project. If you're the owner of a pile of such magazines, tricks that often help are: to fold a page over so a corner sticks out, mark articles with paper clips, or leave magazines open to articles you found of interest when you first read them. Often you'll be returning to these for information and being able to quickly spot articles you're looking for can save a lot of time.

Another "quick and dirty" method of collecting reference materials from magazines is to simply rip articles out and file them in a cabinet. The catch to this is that most magazines continue articles into back sections of their publications. This can often lead to having several endings of major articles on one page. Ripping out one article ruins the others for later use.

To keep your office from looking like it is occupied by a packrat, you'll probably want to develop some sort of storage system. Large numbers of magazines are better stored in large boxes on shelves in a back room somewhere.

Sometimes when I've collected a lot of material for an article or book, I store it all in one box along with my notes, computer disk copy, and photos I didn't use as well as copies of those I did use. This makes it possible to go back and mine the material for similar books or articles. And it is a real plus when the editor asks me to update a book. Then everything is right there, ready for the work to begin — or at least to give me a leg up on getting started with the project.

A few magazines, journals, or other publications may be available on CD or DVD. These can be very useful and take up hardly any room (especially as opposed to stacks of magazines). About the only catch is that these can be a tad hard to

search through if the pages have simply been photographed and only cataloged by date. Then searching for the article you need practically requires a trip to a public library with access to the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* to find what you need.

Free Info

The book publishers you're interested in writing for, as well as publishers advertising in magazines you use for reference, will also generally have books or catalogs that you'll require for sources of information as well. Therefore, it's wise to get such publishers' catalogs and spend a goodly sum on books containing the information you'll be needing. (Just be sure to check your local public library first to be sure the book isn't there. Purchase only books you can't borrow.)

(Book catalogs can also be very useful for seeing what is selling well for the publisher. These books will be listed toward the front of the catalog or featured in other ways. If you see a certain type of book is doing well, then put on your thinking cap and see if you can create a proposal along those lines.)

Sometimes you can obtain reference publications without paying cash for them. One way to do this is to write book reviews for a magazine or newsletter. This allows you to get paid for the review *and* request sample books from publishers. By reviewing books and magazines that will double as your reference materials, you'll build your personal reference library at the same time.

Another way to obtain review copies, if available, is writing articles or books in which you can recommend other publications. If you're writing a book about hurricanes, for example, you might be able to get a publisher to send complimentary

copies of other hurricane books in exchange for recommending them "for further reading." This can also be done to obtain complimentary subscriptions to magazines if you contact the editor or marketing manager. This technique can be quite valuable, and it's always worth keeping in mind when writing a book or article.

Sources of "free" information can prove invaluable. These are various catalogs, brochures, and publicity information from many companies. Many of these are on the Net; if they're not there (or you want more detailed pictures of products) you can obtain a print catalog by simply calling the "public information" or publicity department of a large company, explaining what project you're working on, and asking them if they can help you. Since they'll usually be more than happy to get some positive coverage, they'll send you a wealth of detailed information that isn't available in more general reference books or magazine articles.

Phone for Help

Phoning, e-mailing, or faxing a company can also help you obtain information by contacting the personnel actually involved with a product or in research. These people can give you information about what was tried, and proved to be a dead end, who was involved in research and development, and various anecdotal stories that can add color and interest to a writing project. (Such "insider" information will also make you seem to be more of an expert than you may feel like. As such, the information will make readers want to buy your books and/or editors more likely to purchase your future projects.)

If you can't locate a company address, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses at a web site, the reference librarian at a public library can steer you to the proper directories listing vari-

ous companies and corporations nationwide. Once you have the phone numbers and addresses, contact the company. If you're not in a hurry, you can send letters; faxes and e-mail are faster, and a phone call is apt to get you the most information, since you can immediately ask follow-up questions if something isn't clear or occurs to you as you're speaking.

Much the same method can be used to get information and publications from government agencies and government watchdog groups. The secret is in finding the correct agency or group that will have the information. Currently most government web sites aren't too useful; but they may give you a key phone number to call. Once you have that, use the telephone to track down that department and a person that can help you.

Sometimes you can also find the government personnel to help you by checking in the telephone directory and trying to locate the agency that can help you. If you're in doubt, there are also government information numbers you can call for information; these are listed in the directory as well. Be prepared for a lot of false leads and run-arounds.

While many government employees are helpful and nearly all very courteous, the majority are pretty ignorant about where to find information, so prying information from government agencies is tough. Perseverance and patience are necessities. Always be sure to ask what other agency you might call if the one you've reached proves to be a blank. Keep calling and you'll eventually get to someone who can help you.

Whether you're calling government agencies or private companies, telephone calls can get very expensive. There are several tricks to keeping costs manageable.

One is to find a long-distance company that will offer low rates when you normally call. Some of these operations offer low evening rates but their daytime rates make up for it. So don't sign onto one of these. Rates can vary considerably by

day and time from one company to the next, so do your homework to get the lowest rates when they'll do you the most good (and if you have a business phone line and home phone line in a home office, you might want to get a different company for each line so you can call cheaply when each line is most often used).

Even cheaper is a free call. Many companies have toll-free numbers; while there's a directory of toll-free numbers, it's often out of date, since companies are constantly adding and changing toll-free numbers. Since calling information via a toll-free number doesn't currently cost anything (while regular directory assistance does), it's a lot simpler to dial 1-800-555-1212 and ask if the company or government agency you wish to contact has a toll-free number.

If a company or agency doesn't have a toll-free number, you can often phone at lower rates (depending on the long-distance system you subscribe to) if the location of the entity is in a time zone west of you. If, for example, you live on the east coast, calling a company in California after the daytime rates change to evening rates can save you a small amount of change. If you consistently make your calls when the rates are lower, you can save quite a sum over time.

For those living in time zones in the western U.S., it's possible to call early in the morning to get lower rates. This isn't quite as easy to do, since the rates change to their highest daytime rates at 8:00 AM and office workers often don't get to their business all that early. But it will sometimes work if you're on Pacific time and are calling someone on the east coast or even in the Central time zone.

Building an In-House Library

Of course, information doesn't have to be gleaned only via hi-tech gadgets. Books will undoubtedly continue to be important. Too, books are surprisingly easy to use: easily portable, non-electrical, and capable of being used in a wide range of lighting conditions. They aren't damaged by dust, and work if you are out of batteries or sitting in the back yard far from an outlet. Dropping one isn't going to damage it and it can be stored on a shelf ready to go without need of periodic maintenance.

The catch with books is that new ones are expensive. And they're more and more being aimed at mass audiences, making them less useful to a nonfiction writer looking for very specific information. Consequently, most nonfiction writers find themselves ordering from specialty book catalogs or haunting used bookstores.

Many writers discover "treasures" at used bookstores and in technical and specialty book catalogs. Because the information covered by nonfiction writers isn't always of great interest to the public in its "raw" form, technical books are often short-lived and printed in small runs of only a few thousand books. Consequently, such books are rarely seen on book stands.

For those with the patience and time, checking out library fund-raising book sales, used book stores, and garage sales can enable a writer to build a reference library of off-beat books.

The catch is that you have to buy books as they're available and do without when you can't find what you want. Too, the information can be quite out of date if not useless in some areas — like physics, electronics, or computers.

If you find yourself making a name in a certain field of nonfiction writing, then my advice is to buy all the reference books you can find about the subject, read them, and start

promoting yourself as an "expert" in that area. Soon you'll build up a following of loyal readers, and publishers will be seeking you out to write books and articles for them, rather than your having to grovel to get into print.

Interviews

Sometimes the best research is gleaned by speaking to people face-to-face in personal interviews. Do take notes at such encounters and — if at all possible — take along a tape recorder and perhaps a camera. Tape recorders are essential for getting accurate quotes (and also preventing lawsuits should someone claim they didn't say what you wrote that they said); be sure to explain to the person you're interviewing that you want to record them so you can be sure to quote them accurately and you'll be more apt to be allowed to record the conversation. The machine will make it easier for you to get your information accurate and has the added benefit of shortening an interview since you'll not be pausing between questions trying to scribble your notes.

Your notes don't need to be as detailed as they would be if you did not have a recorder — but be sure to take enough notes that you can get by should you lose the tape. Check batteries before you go and have spare batteries and tapes in case the interview lasts longer than you expected, with useful material spewing out of the mouth of your interviewee. A good recorder should be relatively small and have an automatic-gain-control mike built into it. And don't skimp on tape; get the best you can find so the sound quality is good.

It should be noted that, when someone you're interviewing tells you that something is "off the record" or otherwise notes that some tidbit is not for publication, you *must* treat it that way. If you publish something that was "off the record," the

person who told you the information not only won't be apt to feed you more information, they may sue you. Furthermore, if they contact your publisher or others, you may discover you're practically blacklisted, with no one interested in handling your writing.

If you get "off the record information," it is still valuable, however. It can steer you toward the truth. And you may also employ the information to ask questions of another person who will then admit the same thing — only *on* the record, so you can then bring the information out in the article or book you're working on.

Always get confirmation before going out on a limb. This is especially important if a person speaks "off the record," as they may actually be feeding you false information and making it so they can't be stuck in print with having given it to you. "Off the record" should set off warning bells in your head and cause you to be skeptical of what's being told you; a lot of politicians have used "off the record" remarks about opponents or staff they were about to fire, to create problems that later made the writers who believed the untruths get burnt as well.

A camera is useful if you're doing an article about the person being interviewed. In such a case, pictures of the person will be useful for illustrations. You can get pretty sneaky with photos to pick up other information about a person. For example, you might take photos that also capture background material such as flags, trophies, or pictures in the room that tell a lot about the person you're interviewing. Pictures can reveal to readers what books are in his library, how his desk is arranged, etc. (Sometimes these will also permit you to study things in detail at a later date while appearing to be a bit disinterested in them during the interview.) You may also gain some insight into what the person feels is important, what has shaped their opinions, and so forth, by studying pictures you took.

This captured detail in pictures can also be useful for putting "color" into the final article. For example, you can later study your pictures to write about what was on the walls, desk, bookshelves, or whatever (and have photographs to back you up should some of the material be controversial).

Personal interviews of someone far from where you're living can be expensive in terms of time and money. Fortunately, you can also conduct interviews over the phone. Often you'll actually even get *more* information, since the person you talk to will be more relaxed on the phone. (If you tape the conversation, be sure to get permission beforehand; not doing so is illegal in many states.)

The big shortcoming with phone interviews is the lack of photos. With journal articles or books, this may not be too much of a problem. Family photos or, if the person is famous, publicity shots may also be available — be sure to check and offer to pay for the picture.

Another type of interview (which I've never seen described anywhere) is the "written interview." This consists of a letter or e-mail of questions, which you create, leaving space for handwritten replies to each question. This is sent to the person to be "interviewed" (along with a stamped return envelope if you're doing this by snail mail). The interviewee fills out his answers to the questions and mails it back to you.

The catch to this is that you have to do some other background material on the person you interview, or lift information from some of your questions to create background material and an introduction. But the end result often gives a better picture of the person you interview, since he has time to think out his answers to your questions. (If you save your questions sent by letter on your word processor, your article will be about one fourth done, since you'll not have to retype the questions for the final article; and with e-mail, it is mostly a

matter of moving the words around a tad and then just adding an intro and wrap-up to the piece.)

The Boob Tube

Even the vast wasteland of TV can be a source of information. The "Discovery Channel," "History Channel," and a wealth of news programs can all provide sources of information. If you use these, it's wise to purchase a VCR to capture the information so you can review it if you miss anything. TV tends to be fast-paced; a freeze-frame feature is essential to glean details that are impossible to see during the fast movement of most shows.

Be sure to document the time, channel, and program when taking notes from these sources. These can then be employed as footnotes if you're going over concepts or ideas that readers may have doubts about, or if you decide to use brief quotes from the program in your book or article.

Much the same can be done with the radio, including talk programs and interviews. Ideally, taping this information is also useful.

Whether getting information from the TV or radio, it is wise to save a tape copy of anything that you feel might later be disputed by a reader, editor, or the person who said something controversial. One of the current tricks employed by many politicians as well as cults and others is to simply deny that something they did or said ever occurred. Having a tape of them saying what they claim they did not can quickly bring an end to any doubts — at least in the mind of your editor or a jury should you be taken to court over the issue.

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Be prepared to get information from a wide range of sources. The more information you have at your disposal, the easier your research will be and the more quickly you can get your work done.

Chapter Five
The Writing Basics

A sage once quipped that the hardest thing about writing is writing. That sounds flippant — unless you've had to write professionally. Then you realize how true this is. Because until you put words into a word processor, you have nothing to work with. You need something to hone into a finished product.

So this is always the first step of writing: getting those words cranked out. And the secret to doing this is simply to write like crazy, not worrying about whether your spelling, punctuation, or syntax is correct.

You can make it correct later.

The important thing is to start writing and get something, no matter how crude, to work with. Force yourself to get into your chair, power the computer, and write. If you're concerned about fixing the leaking faucet, yard work, other busy work as a freelancer, office gossip and politics, opening mail, reading e-mail, or any of the other dozens of odds and ends you can do instead of writing, you'll just never get any real writing done. Instead, shut out the world and write. That's the only way you'll ever get any decent amount of work done and the only way you'll ever make any money at it.

The guys who sit around thinking of the careful wording they need to use, hatching the perfect outline, or trying to get

it right with the first draft are *never* going to be much good as writers. (They're the people who you meet at parties who tell you all about the work they will write one day — but never will find the time to do it.)

Dealing With Writer's Block

Of course, no matter what kind of a ball of fire you are at the keyboard, you'll occasionally have trouble beginning, or become tired of writing. Names for this condition vary from profession to profession. In other lines of work, it's known as "burn out" or "mid-life crisis." With writers, it's generally called writer's block. (Less generous souls call it laziness.)

Writer's block can be serious.

Otherwise fine writers have suffered for years without being able to get anything produced. If you want to be a suffering artist, this isn't too bad. If you're trying to make a decent living writing, it's disastrous.

Fortunately, modern psychology as well as writers talking to writers have been able to develop solutions to the problem of writer's block. Frankly, the best thing I've found is to follow the advice given above and simply "write like crazy." Most writers discover if they get started writing, the problem vanishes.

Some creative people also have manic-depressive tendencies. Not a lot is known about this mental affliction but it can make those suffering from it euphoric for a time and then severely depressed at other times.

For a time, it was assumed that manic-depressive people had nothing wrong with them physically. Rather, manic-depression was seen as an emotional problem. But recent studies suggest the condition is hereditary, with many writers seeming to suffer from it.

If you have profound bouts of manic-depression, you should get professional help from a psychiatrist or psychologist. In the past, writers feared that getting such help would destroy their creativity. Now both writers and psychiatrists claim treatment usually helps a writer produce more quality writing.

Of course, the choice of a writing career is almost like asking to be a manic-depressive. A writer will go for stretches without work and suddenly will hit it big (to him at least) with a contract, magazine article, or whatever. Instant celebration. Then the effect wears off in a day or two, any money that comes in is quickly spent paying bills, and it's back to trying to sell another article to pay the bills. Writing is full of these ups and downs.

Perhaps the worst "downer" comes in finishing a long writing project. In such a case, you carefully polish and write and work for weeks or months. The manuscript is finally printed and dropped into the mailbox.

And nothing happens.

No one pats you on the back to congratulate you. Trumpets don't sound, the heavens do not open up for angels to descend and honor you for all the hard work. Chances are you'll not hear from your editor or boss for some time — perhaps not at all.

If the project comes back for reworking — more depression. If it doesn't, there's no reward for a long time. When the advance check or other payment finally comes, you're rocketed to the top of your emotional roller coaster.

Then that wears off and you plummet again.

Then the book or article gets into print. Up you go again. Then down...

You get the picture.

One way around this is to set daily goals. Decide to produce ten to twenty pages of "rough" draft or an equal number of pages rewritten and polished. If you meet that goal, discon-

tinue your work for the day. After a week of meeting your page output requirement (or even if you meet it just one day, if you're feeling depressed), give yourself a small reward. Perhaps rent a video, a few hours listening to a favorite recording, or taking a walk. Use these rewards to keep yourself going.

And when that manuscript gets into the mail, take your spouse out to dinner or throw a party. Do something — it will improve your writing and keep you at it. (Writers can reward themselves with food. But this isn't wise, since being overweight is a hazard of the profession due to lack of exercise. It's better to have a reward other than food.)

An added plus of getting into the habit of producing a set number of pages of manuscript per day is that you can calculate how long it'll take you to finish a writing project. This can help you schedule your work and be able to meet deadlines.

Technical writing can be slow, especially when you have to look stuff up all the time (like just how much a widget weighs or the number of windows a UH-60A helicopter has on its right side). Such work gets tedious and you can spend hours finding the information to just write a few paragraphs. In such a case, don't be afraid to take frequent breaks to let your brain un-stew.

Studies suggest that those working at word processors have *greater* output if they take a ten minute break every hour. So do yourself — and your writing — a favor. Your productivity will increase as your mind and eyes, back, and parts south get a rest, too.

Many writers find that varying writing tasks helps them avoid writer's block. Some writers find working on several books or other major projects at once increases their output and helps them avoid depression when a project is finally finished. Related work such as editing, teaching, laying out a newsletter, or the like may also help clear the cobwebs from the far corners of your brain.

Sometimes writer's block occurs because the job is just too overwhelming. To avoid this, be sure you always pick a writing task that will permit you to do your best work. This can be hard. My advice is pick something that will limit your article's length and scope as well as enabling you to create a workable outline. Often people launch upon a topic that is too large, too complex, or too vague for the creation of an article.

Back up and review what you're trying to do. Is it doable? It may be that your writer's block is really the realization that you're facing an impossible task.

Once you've settled upon a subject and have created a workable outline, write, write, write. Don't worry about spelling, length, or anything else. Just get something — anything — down on paper. It may sound (and is) almost overly simplistic, but until you have something to work with, to polish, expand, and correct, you have nothing. Once you get something to work with, you'll often discover that your writer's block has vanished.

Since this act of writing will keep writer's block from continuing, setting aside a time each day to write is a good strategy. Even if you only write a letter, work on a few paragraphs, or whatever, having this time gets you used to writing "on demand." That's an important skill that can also help you avoid writer's block.

Sometimes writers get caught up in the mechanics of writing and bog down after the first few paragraphs. If you discover you're having this problem, you might try plowing through the entire rough draft before going back to edit or re-write anything.

Remember that you won't produce perfection with your rough draft — trying to do that is another way to get a good case of writer's block. To get to your best work when starting out as a nonfiction writer, you'll need to revise it three, four, five or however many times it takes to get it polished — and

you may find yourself going over some parts considerably more than five times before it suits you. (Eventually, as your writing skills develop, and editors are willing to spend more time with your manuscripts, you'll need to spend less time reworking material. But that point will take years to reach. Don't start skimping too soon or you'll be sending out inferior work.)

Cut out what isn't needed, add what is missing, check your spelling, tinker with the order of the paragraphs — everything you need to do. But don't do these steps until after you've got the rough draft completed.

Multi-Tasking

Having a number of projects going at once can also get a little hectic. But writers seem to work better with such pressure. The main thing is to gauge how much you can handle without making it hurt, rather than help, your writing efforts. Keep your workload manageable. (A computer word processor program coupled with a hard drive that allows you to cram your different ventures on for ready access when you wish to switch from one to the next are big helps here.)

Even if you're only laboring on one project at a time, you should remember that writing is not just one task. Some writers find that embarking into the daily routine by reviewing and reworking material they created in a rough draft the day before prevents tendencies toward writer's block. Once they get started with corrections, it's then easy to switch over to continuing the rough draft. There is a wide range of work you can do to "get started in the morning." You can rewrite material, proof it, check spelling, contact potential publishers, do research, and so forth until you're up to doing creative, "rough

draft" work. Writing isn't just a single task — and that's what keeps it so interesting for most authors.

Other writers like to quit in the middle of an idea or paragraph rather than completing a chapter, article, or whatever they've been working on. The next day, they return to the word processor and know exactly what they're going to write. They sit down and are propelled into the next project, chapter, or whatever, without thinking about it.

Finally, some writers are either day or night people. Due to how your brain is wired, you may function better late at night or, conversely, very early in the morning. If you're freelance, you can take advantage of this by working during the period when you're at your best. (If you're not freelance, that's one of the tough parts of being an eight-to-fiver.)

How many hours per day should you work on writing?

You'll probably discover that this varies from one day to the next. If you freelance from your home, you will recurrently work in short periods thanks to babysitting on the side, telephone interruptions from publishers, editors, salesmen, and so forth. This can be a plus since you'll discover that your brain is frequently chugging away on writing problems while you're away from your word processor apparently working at something else.

Writing isn't an eight-to-five business even if you're *not* a freelance author. While you may only be "writing" at your word processor for a set period, you'll realize that you're *working* on writing projects almost every waking moment and sometimes in your sleep.

Ideas can pop in, in the middle of a dream, when passing the time of day in seemingly idle conversation, while driving, or whatever. Once your brain gets geared to this creative process, it goes full tilt all the time. (In a sense, you will often be able to say that you work 24 hours a day on your writing.)

All that said, most writers engage in the actual process of writing only 4 to 6 hours a day (with an occasional two to four days averaging 8-10 hours to stay within a deadline). But they also spend much time researching articles, reading, and "office house keeping" by shuffling papers and so forth.

The hard thing about writing is writing.

Getting Ideas

We've covered a few ways of getting ideas for new articles or books. But you can never have too many good ideas. Where does a nonfiction writer get project ideas?

Well, if you're writing for a business, the ideas will routinely be handed to you. Unfortunately, these ideas tend to be half-baked. Nonwriters often feed you these "good ideas" that aren't worth a nickel, usually because they were excellent — ten years ago. Sometimes the ideas are totally unworkable.

If the "good idea" comes from your boss or employer, much of your creative endeavor will be devoted to modifying the idea into something workable. So the first rule is, if you're lucky enough to get "good ideas" from friends, you can just smile, mutter something noncommittal, and wander on. With the boss giving you the ideas, you may need to create something that *appears* to be the idea (in title perhaps or slant) while actually taking a more profitable trail in the actual writing.

If you're a freelancer, things can be quite different. Then you need to generate your own ideas for magazine articles or books that a publisher will be interested in handling and which stand a chance of selling.

Novices spend excessive amounts of time trying to come up with an original subject to write about. That's not how the "pros" do it.

Here's the shocker: When it comes down to it, most writers (as well as those working in the arts) plagiarize. No, they don't copy word for word — that would break the law. But they do borrow other people's ideas to some extent and then modify them to suit their own needs.

The originality comes in making the idea belong to the (latest) writer by getting a different slant on the story or combining it with other ideas. Writing teachers in their ivory towers and beginning writers are usually appalled at such suggestions. But that's how things get done in the real world if you want to make a living at nonfiction writing.

If we can digress from writing a moment and go to music, we can see excellent examples of just how this technique works. For example, J.S. Bach is generally considered to have been one of the most creative composers who ever lived. And yet, he often employed a Baroque process called "alliteration" to create many of his most famous pieces.

Alliteration is the polite term for plagiarizing.

Here's how it worked for Bach and other musicians. The composer would take a musical composition by himself or, more commonly, someone else. He'd then go through it changing the piece — sometimes measure-by-measure or note-by-note — into a "new" composition.

When you hear the original and the composer's alliteration of it performed, you may note that they're similar, if you have a good sense of musical composition structure. But usually, you can't tell they're alike unless you note key changes and rhythm patterns. Only when you take out the two manuscripts and compare them side by side do their structures show that some "copying" occurred.

The best in literature is also guilty of borrowing ideas. Shakespeare's plots weren't new. What makes his plays go on and on (beyond their usefulness, perhaps) is what he did in transforming other people's ideas. He reworked old ideas to

create something that was worthwhile and (if the theories about someone else writing his work are unfounded!) all his own.

Poetry ideas are regularly borrowed. Many successful novels are "spin-offs" of another original — though it's harder to spot in prose writing than it is in music.

Needless to say, the same thing is done in nonfiction writing. You collect ideas and information from other writers and rework it into your own articles. If you're a talented writer, the finished piece may be — just as with Bach and Shakespeare — better than the original.

Forget the idea that creativity "happens in a vacuum." That's false 98 percent of the time. All the arts build on their past and upon the culture they're in. The same is true with writing and especially true of "mundane" nonfiction writing.

The key is not the originality of the idea or form. It's what is done within the confines of that form. You can rework or broaden an idea so it becomes greater than the original.

Of course, you don't copy things or ideas word for word and — in nonfiction writing — you will generally have several sources of data that have to be unified into your new material. But basically what you're doing is reworking old material, ideally giving it some new slant, added information, and a fresh look.

To do your best, it's important to have a subject *you* are interested in writing about. As you work on various writing projects, you'll likely discover subjects that interest you more than others. If the area of writing continues to interest you, by all means try to land as many writing projects as you can handle in this area. As you learn more about a field, gather reference materials, and add facts-and-figures to your hard drive in the way of past writing projects and notes, you'll be on your way to becoming an "expert" on that subject.

Titles

Always spend some time on the title because this is the "foot in the door" that will determine whether or not your editor is going to spend much time looking at a proposal or manuscript.

Many editors won't even look at an article if their interest isn't piqued by the title. Generally personal names, unless they're of someone famous, aren't going to work. "Harry" as a book or article name is a bit common — we all know somebody by the name of Harry and will tend to think of that person rather than the one you describe. So you're apt to get a "ho-hum" attitude from many editors with this type of title.

On the other hand, "Harry Houdini" would work if your editor was working for a magic magazine or publisher where a historical article might meet with a favorable audience.

Also avoid clichés. Something like "The Good Die Young," while it might work great in conveying what you're trying to tell in a book or article, is just too trite to do much for most editors.

A twist on a cliché might work (if someone else hasn't already done it). For example, "The Bad Die Old" might be a twist that will work; ditto with "Too Cantankerous to Die" or "The Secret for Living Long" (the latter sounding like a nice bit for some of those booklets sold in the classified sections of magazines).

Anyway, you've got the idea. The main thing is to capture the editor so he's going to launch into the piece to see what you've got to say to answer the mystery or deliver on the promise of the title.

Creating a Hook

What this means is that you must make your "lead" paragraph(s) a "hook" that will capture your readers and reel them into the story. One way to get the reader right into the story is to drop him into some "action."

In effect, you'll need to borrow some of the techniques employed by fiction writers and apply them to your nonfiction writing. That's right: You're going to be creating at least a little "story" type writing to capture the reader's imagination and attention. Doing this will hook him — and your editor. You need some action at the first of anything you write.

By action, I don't mean bombs and bullets (though that is sometimes an option); just something like having the main character walk into the room with a package, find him talking to another character, or whatever. In effect, you create a mental picture that gives the reader more than abstract ideas or words, rather making him "see" what's unfolding in his mind. This makes him start to care about what's happening, or going to happen, so he continues to read through what you are presenting.

Finding the right action event that will hook the reader isn't always easy. The chronological order of events can be a quick way to get an article or story into a logical order. About the only time it doesn't work is if the story starts out in a dull fashion. That can be cured by starting with a flashback that you leave before it comes to a conclusion. This creates a "cliff hanger" that makes the reader continue in order to see how the character gets out of his predicament.

Flashbacks are a little tricky at first. But there's a basic rule of thumb you can use to create these without much trouble. The trick is to use "had" to introduce the first few verbs at the beginning of a flashback. Next you shift into past tense (with-

out using had) with your verbs. Finally, to get out of the flashback, had is again often (but not always) used at the very last of the flashback along with some transition like "now," "today," "that was in the past," or some such thing that lets the reader know for sure that the flashback is over. While there are other ways of doing this, this works, since readers are used to seeing it in print.

The big plus of the flashback is that you can begin an article with the most exciting piece in the story and then leave the reader hanging, wondering how it will end. You save this ending up for the end of the article to keep them reading, if for no other reason than to see what the outcome will be (hopefully you'll have some meat in the center of the article — but I suspect that many people would read through a lot of drivel if you had just a good flashback beginning and the outcome at the end of the article).

Another key is to skip unexciting (and unimportant) sections of happenings. For example, if a policeman you are writing about forgot to carry his gun and that proved to be his downfall, then you might start out with a flashback of him facing a criminal and suddenly remembering he has forgotten his sidearm. Then you end the flashback and show the key point where he forgot his gun.

But now the story bogs down, because he has hours of paperwork. How do you get around that?

The answer is in transitional phrases. "Later that day...," "In the next county...," or (that old stand by) "Meanwhile, back at the ranch..." — all will work to let you leapfrog material that you and your reader don't need to know. (Oddly enough these also cement material together; sometimes you might even want to create what appears to be a transitional phrase simply to connect two sections in an article.)

Probably the most important thing to do to achieve good writing is to "show, not tell" in your writing. One way to do

that is to drop the reader right into the middle of the action. Back when editors did serious rewriting of material (which isn't any longer the case because of time constraints), the first trick they often employed was simply to cut the first few paragraphs or even pages of pieces written by less experienced writers.

That's one trick you might try with your own work — cut the first few paragraphs and see what happens. (It's a trick I often use myself with material that doesn't work at the opening.)

Style and Stuff

An editor sits at his desk, a huge pile of manuscripts hovering on its surface like a vulture waiting for its prey to succumb to the desert heat. The editor doesn't have time to read through each article because he's pushing a deadline. Instead he reads only the first few paragraphs. A few he doesn't read past the first sentence. Before long, he has worked his way down the pile until finally he finds the one he wants. Without even finishing the first paragraph, he knows he's found what he needs.

How can you be sure the manuscript he's selected is yours?

One important thing to keep in mind is that both your editor and the readers he is editing for have little time (or think they do because of hectic schedules) so they're not going to spend much time with what you write unless you hook them during the first few minutes when they start reading your material. This situation isn't about to change since our whole culture uses this technique; watch an ad, the lead-in to a TV show, or the beginning of a modern movie. Almost all will have a "hook" that captures your attention and — if the writer has done his job — will keep you watching to see what the story is about, whether the hero escapes his apparent fate, or whatever.

The days when writers started with background material on a character and the reader was forced to wade through the first chapters before getting to the promised action are over; anyone who starts that way is going to have their material rejected.

Transitions

For most long writing projects, and some complicated short ones, you'll need to make transitions from one idea to the next to keep your finished project smooth and flowing to the reader. There're eight good tricks you can use to do this.

One is to repeat the main point or idea of one paragraph in the next. This can be done by breaking longer paragraphs into smaller ones. But more often you'll have to expand your material slightly.

This same idea can be used to move from one chapter to the next; you create a phrase, question, or other idea at the end of the chapter, then take up from there in the next. Ideally this will be a "cliffhanger" that asks a question or presents some reason for the reader to flip the page and dive into the next chapter, though this isn't always possible with nonfiction.

A second method is to repeat key words or pronouns from a previous paragraph. "All writers should remember..." in paragraph one; "Many writers feel..." in paragraph two; and "Of course, writers can't always..." in paragraph three, for example.

You might also employ a question to lead into the new point and paragraph. "But what should you do?" will lead into a new section dealing with specifics you've generalized in the article. This can be most effective if you can manipulate elements from a previous paragraph to form your question.

A fourth way is to employ the connecting words: now, then, soon, someday, yesterday, tomorrow, forever, meanwhile, afterward, across, against, above, below, beyond, nearby, before, after, next, following, again, first, second, third, finally, likewise, otherwise, consequently, although, also, however, but, nevertheless, or therefore. (This tactic is used throughout this book.)

The trick is not overdoing these words. They can cause your writing to sound stilted if you're not careful, or like someone who employs the words to kill time while waiting for a new idea to pop into his head.

A fifth method can be borrowed from fiction writers. They use a time or phrase transition to move things along. These are often fashioned with the connecting words listed above. Examples: "Just then...," "After a few hours...," "When they arrive...," "The following day...," "After a while...," "By the time...," etc.

There are other transitional phrases more suitable for nonfiction writing. Among these are: "in addition to," "for instance," "for example," "let's suppose," "as a result," "in fact," "this isn't the only reason," "on the other hand" (employ this only once in a group since people only have two hands); "despite that;" "on the contrary;" or "there's another side to the problem."

A sixth method is to use a summation of what's coming next. This "crystal ball" transition transports the reader into the new idea. "There's no doubt that one of the great doctors of the 20th Century was..."; "But this wasn't the only thing going on that year...". (A few political writers employ this summation at the beginning and the end of a section. Basically they tell the reader what is coming, present the quote or incident, then sum up what is important about the happening.)

A seventh trick is to exploit subheadings after the main title or chapter heading to break a piece into logical sections. This

is cheating a bit, but it works well with some material, especially when it is very diverse. This also allows you to create a "catch all" chapter in a tome if you have a lot of details that don't seem to fit together gracefully with any other method. (Yes, I have also employed this technique in this manual.)

The eighth way is to use number, word, or letter designations to point out each section — as was done in the above paragraphs of this section listing the eight methods of achieving smooth transitions. As you can see, this lends itself to more formal writing (and you may even have felt it was a bit out of place in this manual since it doesn't fit the "voice" I've been using). But it can be made to fit well in many articles and can unite information that otherwise defies any structured form.

Of course, the trick here is to first write all the points, then go back in your manuscript and add how many there are. This, too, was done here. The "There're eight good tricks you can use to do this" that introduced this section was written after I wrote everything and found I had a total of eight.

Regardless of what you use (note the transitional phrase), don't exploit them too often. They can become tiring. If you've arranged your material in a logical fashion, transitions may not be needed very often. If you find yourself using excessive numbers of transitions, try to move sections into a more sensible order to avoid having to overdo them.

Always work to have your writing flow together so it reads like one seamless whole.

Making a Scene

Another way to "show, not tell" is to create a small, usually poignant scene that the reader can picture in his mind. This might be done throughout a whole article or even a book, or

(more often with nonfiction writing) used to accent an important point or set the stage for the information to follow.

Usually the best pictures occur when you get a human being the reader can identify with into the "scene" you create. It's always a good idea to get the "human angle" into an article so the reader has someone to be captivated by.

For example, a civil defense journal once carried an article about how people react to the aftermath of serious weather damage like tornadoes or hurricanes. At one point, the author explained that people often reacted irrationally to nearly total damage to their homes. *Then* he described coming onto a scene where people who had been overwhelmed by the damage in the aftermath of a tornado were in front of totally destroyed homes, raking the lawn or attempting to repair a small part of a home that was irreparably damaged.

The image of these poor people whose houses are totally wrecked standing in the front yard trimming the hedge or raking the leaves off the grass is both tragic and humorous.

That writer made an impression that will stick with me forever.

That's what you need to do as well.

Other types of anecdotes can also be useful. These, of course, make your point or show why things happen in the manner they do. An article about why helicopters are the only type of aircraft used to any great extent by the U.S. Army, for example, would give added insight if you told how, when the Air Force became a separate entity from the U.S. Army, the Army had to agree never to operate fixed-wing aircraft in combat. This could then enable the reader to understand why helicopters might be used, not so much because they're ideal, but because they're the exclusive option available to the Army.

Dialogue

Another good trick for "showing, not telling" is to employ dialogue at the beginning of an article. People tend to create mental pictures of speakers when they read dialogue; the human mind is keyed into the sound of a human voice. (In fact, most people's blood pressure rises when they hear a conversation.)

You can take advantage of this by using dialogue to "show" what's going on. In fact, you can even exploit it (provided you don't overdo things) to let the character "tell" what's happening. For example, instead of telling the reader that John made a fool of himself, you might have his worst enemy, Sam, say,

"Boy, John, you made a complete fool of yourself." Sam laughed rudely. John felt an angry blush creep up the back of his neck.

Notice that I've cheated a little here. I also "show" that John is both humiliated and angry at Sam — and probably himself. The "angry blush" tells more than my simply writing, "John felt angry." (A word other than "angry" would work better here, too.)

Dialogue can make or break a story or article and can be helpful in developing a story. However, care must be taken since an article is supposed to be nonfiction. You can't make the quotes up as you go along.

The best way to get dialogue is with a tape recorder. But that's generally not possible. The next best thing is to get quotes from people who were on the scene. These may not be verbatim, but readers (and editors) will understand this. You can even create dialogue provided you note that it is created and you do not assign thoughts or words that a person did not say (this latter point is the thing lawsuits are made of — be

careful). The trick is to be sure that the reader understands that the dialogue is imaginary.

For example, you might write,

While no one knows exactly what was said that day, it is easy to imagine that the conversation went something like this:

And then launch into your semi-authentic dialogue. Now the reader understands that you aren't making an exact quote. This type of dialogue is more useful in humor than news-style writing, but is a good trick to keep in mind.

Of course, you need to be careful that you don't create dialogue that might get you sued. For example, you don't want your imaginary dialogue to suggest that two company officials were plotting to defraud the public with defective products or some such thing. From such things are lawsuits formed.

Problems and Complications

Most short stories have a very basic layout that you can adapt to most nonfiction "story" formats, as well as some how-to articles. In a good short story there will generally be a problem, a complication and then — toward the end — a resolution; almost every short story can be broken down into those components.

For example, you might be writing about an inventor. You can format your article like a story, telling about the problem he is trying to overcome with his invention. But to make this work, you also need to have some obstacle that blocked his way — say, a legal suit from a rival inventor, lack of cash to create a prototype, or whatever. Of course, this won't work if such an event didn't occur. But often real life has these elements, with some seemingly insurmountable complication. That makes the solution to the inventor's problem all the more amazing — and makes it the perfect story to present in a short story format with your nonfiction article.

With some nonfiction, such as a how-to article, you will have troubles doing this and probably won't be able to. However, even here you can often create a story feel by using a sentence to state the problem and the complication, then round off the article with a return to the introductory material to give the character's solution. For example, if you were writing an article about a new run-flat tire, or some invention that makes it possible to inflate a tire in just moments, then you might start with a condensed "story" like this at the beginning of the article:

Frank had the impossible task of changing the tire on his car in the rain. And he was already 15 minutes late for the most important date of his life.

There's the problem and complication, boiled down into two sentences. You next would lead the reader into the article with a phrase like, "Frank would have had a quick fix to his dilemma if he'd had the newest invention to come from the Oppenlander Labs." And to give it a real short story feel, you might even end your article with Frank back in the rain, opening the trunk of his car and re-inflating the tire, thanks to the Jiffy Fixer his dad had placed there. Ten minutes later he can be at the front porch of Ann's house, ready to take her to the prom.

Some of the best stories involve an inner conflict within the central character. Most often his method of dealing with the problem and complication will change him. If you can find real-life situations where a person rose above what they were before a crisis, achieved something they thought impossible, or were otherwise transformed, then you've probably got a good true story that will captivate the reader.

Another short-story technique to remember with articles is to limit the number of characters. Doing so helps keep the article from getting long and complicated. Sometimes it isn't possible, but ideally you'll only have just one or two people

you'll write about in an article. If possible you'll also introduce them to the reader one at a time to prevent confusion.

You can also reduce the length of an article by limiting the time span involved. Instead of following the central character moment-by-moment, you just follow key sections of time (perhaps using a transitional phrase if you must connect two different time periods to make things work).

Of course, if you're working on a series, or longer article and discovering you are coming up short, you can reverse this process to make things longer, adding characters or events, and/or spreading them over a longer time or more locations.

With short stories, the main character of a story should always be established at the very beginning as the viewpoint character (the person through whose eyes everything is seen). This works great with articles as well.

To make this effective, be sure that this character is vividly portrayed. The setting of the article — both its time and place — should be established at the first as well, usually by placing the main character, along with a secondary one, in an opening scene. For example, you can establish where and when the article is taking place, and who the main character you'll be writing about is, in just a sentence or two:

Sam watched the morning sunrise over the cool Kansas plains. It wouldn't be long now before President Eisenhower's train pulled in to the Abilene station.

Word Counts

Often editors will tell you that they want an article 1,000 words in length (or whatever length they want). Beginners (myself included back when) assume that this means a literal 1,000 words, often using their word processor's ability to

count words to come up with approximately those 1,000 words the editor requested.

They send their carefully honed masterpiece in to the publisher, only to discover that now the editor wants "another 250 words" or needs a cut of "500 words." What's going on?

The answer is that the way a publisher counts words and how your word processor counts them are two very different things. What editors really are doing is filling space. They don't really want X number of words but rather the number of words needed to fill the *space* in a magazine or to make the ideal length book they need to sell.

If you hand in a ten-page manuscript to an editor, he will check the last page to see the "10" there, then do a quick calculation in his head, and say 2,500 words. Because to your editor, each double-spaced manuscript page is 250 words, regardless of how many words are actually on it.

This way, they actually have a handle on the space the article will fill. For example, a writer who tends to use descriptions like "a small cat" is going to get a lot more actual words on the page than will a guy who chooses phrases like "the miniscule feline." Two hundred words of the latter style would be nearly twice as lengthy as two hundred words of the former.

So don't use the word counter on your computer or count words per line and multiply to figure the number of words. Instead just count your whole pages as 250 words each and then figure the fractional opening page and last page with a guesstimate of how close they are to whole pages.

Copyrights

At the front of this section, I want to note that I'm no lawyer. I'm a writer and think I have a pretty good feel for things,

but I'd suggest that my thinking could be flawed. So if your editor or publisher — or their legal departments — don't jibe with what I've written here, I'd suggest you listen to them. That said...

Copyright law is vague. That's great for lawyers who like to duke it out in the courtroom. Not so good for those of us who pay the attorneys to wage war on our behalf. It's always best to err on the side of caution.

There are some materials that you can use freely without worry of breaking the law. This material is "public domain." There are also some publications that the author has decided to give away, through a special tag added to a copyright notice. These materials that you can reproduce without breaking any copyright laws include:

- Government documents (produced with tax money and therefore not copyrighted, so everyone can use them freely).
- Material which has been copyrighted but on which the copyright has expired (usually this means the document will be over 75 years old).
- A photocopy of material that states in its copyright notice that photocopying is permitted. This is common with nonprofit organizations and others who want the material to be seen by as many people as possible. However, not all nonprofit or similar materials will be copyright free. Read the fine print.

Everything else is protected and can't legally be used without first obtaining written permission from the holder of the copyright. One point of confusion: Unlike in the past, today's copyright law doesn't require that a copyright notice be attached to a publication in order for it to be protected by a copyright. And it also maintains that everything is protected as soon as it is written by someone and continues to be so pro-

tected for some time after his death. That means e-mails, material on the Internet, or anything else that is written by a living human being is legally protected and you make a copy of it only at great risk.

That said, copyright law is frustratingly vague. And breaking a copyright can be done not only by word-for-word copying, but also if a work is "substantially similar" to an original the author had access to. Unfortunately, once again, how substantially similar is something decided in court.

There are a few places where copyrighted work can be legally copied without fear of fines or charges of breaking the law, however. This is known as "fair use" and is permitted without liability (in theory — being taken to court could be expensive even if you are found innocent, again arguing that you're best to err on the side of caution when it comes to fair use).

Unfortunately, U.S. copyright law doesn't actually define fair use ("vague" is the word we're looking for here). However, it does list four conditions which determine whether material meets the fair use standard:

- The nature of the infringement and why it was done.
- The nature of the work that is infringed upon.
- How much of the copyrighted work is reproduced compared to the length of the whole work.
- How the copying will affect the potential market or value of the original.

It should be noted that not all four points have to be met to give fair use. Often only one or two factors need to be met in order to be defended from a lawsuit. On the other hand, sometimes you might meet three of the factors while the fourth means you're in hot water — it all depends on the material being quoted and how the judge and jury look at the case (meaning that there's a lot of give and take from case to case).

Fortunately, the law gives a few hints as to what actually may constitute fair use. Among the uses that are permitted without criminal infringement are any uses that involve criticism, commentary, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research. While none of these will in itself exempt a writer from infringement charges, being able to argue that you wrote something within one of these categories is going to go a long way toward keeping you out of trouble.

While these factors may actually involve making money (newsmen, commentators, and teachers all work for money, for example), most courts will view such uses as "non-commercial," meaning that their use is less apt to be seen as criminal than if someone reproduced the same material in an article solely for entertainment purposes. For example, an article about how rock music was helping American youth in a journal might get away with fair use in reprinting the entire lyrics of a song, while quoting the same material in a magazine devoted to fans of the group might lead to troubles, since the writer and publisher simply reproduced the lyrics to sell more magazines. Obviously, writing for a nonprofit or educational organization is a big plus in such cases as well.

By the same token, storing a news story you find on the Internet on your hard drive for later reference is probably not a copyright violation, while reproducing it in a book would be. In one case only you are going to see it and you won't be making money on the copy you keep on your drive; in the other case you reproduce it with profit as a motive.

The more creative and original a work is, the more protection it will tend to have in copyright law. For example, taking a photo of a paint-by-numbers picture, which is also a copy of an old master painting and reproducing it in a magazine article probably wouldn't break the copyright law. On the other hand, reproducing a picture of an original painting by an artist whose work has never appeared in any publication (let alone

as a paint-by-numbers piece) would be an offense. If a creation is unique, it has more protection than less original work.

Likewise a quote from a news article is more apt to be fair use than the same length of quote from a short story or the lyrics of a song. The reason is that the news article is more mundane and common while the short story or lyrics are closer to being "one of a kind."

The amount quoted compared to the length of the original work can also be important. For example, quoting a paragraph from an article that is only a page long is a whole lot riskier than quoting a paragraph from an encyclopedia that's thousands of pages long. (Conversely, quoting the last paragraph of a thousand page novel, thereby giving away the key secret of how it ends to anyone reading your article, might be seen as a criminal infringement, since you used one of the more valuable, key elements of the work — so the percentage of material used isn't always the deciding factor.)

This leads to the consideration of how use of copyrighted material might affect the potential market value of a work. This one gets pretty iffy because a court is charged with judging the benefit the public derives from the quote as compared to the loss of value the owner of the original sees in having the quote made. This is the type of thing lawsuits are made of, so be cautious with quotes that might reduce the worth of the article, book, or other work you're quoting from.

While the law doesn't say so in so many words, there's also a factor of whether or not you're attempting to actually steal from the original author of a work. If, for example, you write a quote without noting where it came from (or perhaps even making it appear you came up with the sentences copied), this is going to appear more like an infringement than if you quote the same brief passage and then footnote it, noting who the author was and when and where his writing appeared. While listing a citation for the article, chapter, or whatever the source

material is from isn't a clear defense, it is a help. So always be sure to give credit where credit is due, including volume numbers, pages, and dates for the material when applicable.

For extensive quotes, you should protect yourself by contacting the publisher of the original material. This address will generally be in the front of a publication or you can locate it at the reference desk of a library (*Books in Print* and *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory* are two good sources to check). Once you have the address, you should then send a cover letter to the publisher clearly stating who you are, where the material will appear, how much will be used, and other details. You need to include an SASE for the return of the permission letter and should expect the reply to take up to six weeks or more.

Obviously, that's a lot of work, especially if you need bunches of quotes in a book or article. In such a case you might be better off paraphrasing the information and then using a footnote to give credit to the source of the information. This gives credit where it is due *and* it also gives you more credibility since you're admitting that your ideas have come from other sources, rather than from you alone.

Form and Substance

When working on the final draft that will be submitted to an editor, you need to have it in its proper form. That means you need to double space your manuscript, set the margins so there's ¾ to an inch of space around the sides, and start each chapter with a new page. The title page of your book should have your name, address, and phone number so the editor can get in touch in a hurry if he needs to.

The first chapter, introduction, or whatever should be started about halfway down the page and subsequent chapters should

have a little extra room at the top of the page so your editor can write notes in it if he wishes to.

Use your word processor to add a "header or footer" to each page. This header or footer will contain your name or the article name if you're submitting more than one manuscript to the editor. Set your word processor to add the page number to each sheet of paper (and be sure the page number and header or footer don't try to occupy the same space!).

Each publisher has his own method of doing things. You can save trouble for all parties involved if you write your final draft in the basic format that your publisher will be using. The quirks of your publisher's style will be outlined in its Writer's Guidelines. If you haven't received these, ask for a copy. If they don't have one, ask in what form your manuscript is best submitted. (This is especially important if you have footnotes or other attributed material.)

The Writer's Guidelines is worth its weight in gold because it will tell you not only how to set up your manuscript, but also what length the publisher wants, specific subjects that should be covered (or avoided) and other tidbits you may not glean from reading publications from the organization.

Notice if the publication has any special requirements like wider-than-normal margins, unusual placement of your name, or an electronic disk version of the manuscript. Always be sure to conform to these requests, as failure to do so may cause your manuscript to be rejected before it is even read.

Inscribe this on your monitor or elsewhere: *I will always check the publisher's Writer's Guidelines before starting an assignment.* You'll be glad if you follow this advice; you'll often regret it (and see a rejection for unexpected reasons) if you do not.

Whatever equipment and programs you select, be sure that all letters and documents you send out look as good as you can get them. Potential employers and publishers will assume that

they're seeing your best work when you dispatch an inquiry letter to them. If it's sloppy, you'll be making a poor first impression and will likely lose any chance you might have had of gaining a project.

So always appear professional. Letters should use a standard business format (copy one off some of the junk mail in your mail box if you have any doubts).

Always use your word processor's spell checker and don't be afraid to look up words that aren't in the spell checker. Also employ the electronic thesaurus to keep a little variety in your wording — just don't overdo things and don't make substitutions if you're not sure of the meaning of a word. Otherwise your manuscript may become awkward or even unwittingly humorous.

Finally, be sure to double-check the Writer's Guidelines once more before you send the manuscript out (often authors race through these on the first reading and miss key points — if you've committed this sin, rereading the guidelines at this point may help you make amends). When you're starting out, it helps to have input from someone before sending out your final draft to the publisher. If possible, have a friend, spouse (hopefully also your friend), or business acquaintance check the document before you send it out. They should keep an eye out for punctuation and spelling problems and be prepared to call attention to sections that are hard to understand. Listen to those willing to offer such help, as their efforts can really pay off in helping you create a much better final draft.

For your final printout, use quality paper and a high quality of definition (not draft quality, if you have that option). Also be sure you use a font that doesn't call attention to itself. Save special fonts for title pages and chapter headings — but do a "transparent" font like New Times Roman, which won't distract from what you've written.

If you're a little weak in the rules-of-grammar department, it wouldn't hurt to invest in a copy of *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White, which is available in most book stores (Allyn & Bacon; ISBN: 020530902X August 1999) — save some money and get the paperback edition. Once you have it, study it carefully; the rules don't seep into your brain by osmosis.

Just the Facts

Remembering that time is money, you must always get your writing completed in a minimum amount of time. Fortunately, with nonfiction writing, it's possible to write without the characterization and details needed in fiction writing. You can most often simply say "desk" without having to describe it in detail. (The exception to this is when you're writing about a person in an interview or biography. Then you might want to add details to characterize the person you're describing. For example, instead of "desk" you might elaborate with "his cluttered desk looked as if it had been rescued from the dumpster behind a second hand store.")

Usually you'll need more details in the beginning and ending of an article where you want the reader (and your editor) to get hooked by the "story" elements of the piece and also to finish it with a good feeling about having spent their time with it. If you're really racing a deadline and don't have time to polish and proof all your writing as carefully as you would like, these are the two areas you should go over carefully. Likewise with books, the first couple of chapters and the last should be gone over thoroughly.

One way of speeding up writing is to minimize note taking when researching a project. Let me back up a moment and re-

view the "traditional" method of taking notes that's taught in school (or, at least, was taught the last time I checked).

Here it is: You go through various reference sources, take notes on note cards, and then carefully arrange the notes into order, perhaps making an outline as you go along. The article is then written from these note cards.

The catch to this is that you practically write your article three times, once in bits and pieces on the note cards, again in your outline, and a final time for the rough draft of your article.

As we've seen, it's practical to write the final draft on a word processor, perhaps even expanding the outline to become the article, little by little. But it's feasible to save more time with the computer.

The secret is to skip the note taking process. Or, if you wish, turn the notes into the final draft, by taking notes on the word processor rather than on note cards (and slowly writing the cards by hand).

What about the note card shuffling to get everything into place?

As anyone who's labored with a word processor for long knows, it's super easy to jump from one point to another in a document, adding something here, dropping back to delete something, then galloping forward... until everything is in its place.

So you implement this skip-around tactic to type in your notes as you go along, putting them into order little by little. And, as with note cards, if you decide that a paragraph is in the wrong place, it's simple to use a "block move" to reposition it into its logical spot.

The catch is getting the reference material to the vicinity of your word processor. Usually this isn't hard if you own your reference materials or can check them out of a library. Those who depend on a public or university library that won't allow

reference materials to be checked out may wish to invest in a laptop computer; then your "notes" can be taken in the library. And, on the rare occasions that you can't get your word processor and reference materials together, you can still scribble a few notes. But the fewer, the better.

Of course, this can create quite a confusion of books, magazines, and other materials when you launch into a large writing project. The main thing to remember is that neatness only counts on your finished draft. Having stacks of books and papers around your desk and chair doesn't make any difference as long as you don't forget to include one of your sources of information.

To avoid accidentally omitting anything, I often create a big "finished" stack of reference materials I may be using for a book or article. This consists of books and magazines I've already looted information from. This also gives me a visual reference of how much work is left to go through and how far I've progressed by comparing it to the stack of yet unused reference material.

For really complex reports or books, it's possible to create piles of reference materials representing each chapter of your manuscript. If a reference source will be used in several different chapters, place it in the "chapter pile" for the first chapter it will appear in. After it's been used for that chapter, move it into its subsequent pile.

Remember that getting out of sequence isn't a problem with the word processor. Use the search feature to locate key words in your text that relate to material you find while working on a project and just "plug it in" where it should go.

When collecting electronic documents, I do much the same thing, creating a main file for my book and then sub-files for various subjects and/or chapters. I then dump a copy of each electronic document from the Web (or — more rarely —

material which has gone through the scanner and OCR, come in from e-mail, or accessed from a CD).

This may sound complicated, but in practice it's quite fast and can cut writing projects in half. In effect, such a reduction will increase your productivity by one hundred percent. Coupled with the other savings in time offered by a word processor, many professional writers have reduced their time to produce a book from around a year (before word processing) to about a month (with word processing).

Of course, this is good news and bad news, because every other nonfiction writer competing against you can do the same. And editors, knowing that it takes less time to produce material, are paying most writers about the same for any given job as was paid (with dollars worth more than today) decades ago.

Dry Styles

Another thing that people learn in school is to write in a dry style that displays the writer's virtuosity in spewing impressive phrases and words. This teaching is compounded by professions and lines of learning laden with jargon. By the time a student completes a university's Master's or Doctoral program, he'll often have perfected enough skill to keep anyone outside his profession from ever wanting to read what he writes.

Examples of such "profound" writing fill professional journals and professional magazines. They're rarely read by anyone other than those who are intent on gleaning information from them.

As a nonfiction writer, you need to adopt the opposite tack. You need to write with such clarity that nearly *anyone* who is smart enough to understand what you're writing about won't

be thrown off by scientific or professional jargon he hasn't had the need to learn. Additionally, you need to smooth his way and make your writing enjoyable for him to read.

People teaching in a university need only be published in non-paying journals to show their name in print and avoid the "publish or perish" sword of Damocles that hangs over their heads. *You* need to publish and get paid — or perish. If you aren't writing for "intellectual" journals where big jargon and obscure writing is encouraged, never adopt this style. You need to write articles that sell and will leave editors and readers wanting more, not leave them feeling like narcoleptics.

Of course, those who write obtusely often charge that clear writing is (somehow) a prostitution of writing skills; they'll tell you (if you're unfortunate enough to meet one at a party) that you're not a "serious writer." Ignore them. They're jealous because what you have to say is going to reach more people, and influence them more, than anything that appears in most intellectual journals. Making things enjoyable doesn't mean watering them down or lowering your standards. If anything, it means raising your standards by forcing yourself to write clearly, rather than copping out with intellectual clichés.

One final trick here: The fewer negatives you use, the easier it is to understand what you write. For reasons I don't fully understand, negatives don't make as much sense as positive statements.

Now let's reword that last sentence to make it easier to understand: For some reason that's unclear to me, positive statements are easier to understand than are negative phrases.

Whenever possible, replace the "no," "don't," or other negative with a positive word. The English language is full of antonyms (or whatever English teachers are calling opposites these days), so the work of transformation is easy to do.

Your Style

Eventually you'll have a style of writing that is your own. Many writers refer to this as their "voice," so named because it often resembles the speaking style of a person — although this isn't always the case. But it will be interesting to read (hopefully) and it will become natural to them, giving them a sort of trademark that makes it possible for readers to recognize them and editors to know what to expect when they hire the writer for a job.

Regardless of the voice you finally assume, here's one hint: The closer you can write to the way people talk, the better. Do this and you're halfway home to getting a voice that works, as well as a style that is your own.

One of the big problems of nonfiction writing, especially in manuals and company brochures, is how stilted it can be. If you can get away with it, consider using contractions (as I've been doing throughout this book). These make people feel "at home" reading your material. For example, "It is easy to see..." doesn't flow nearly as well as, "It's easy to see..."

I personally use a lot of contractions that many don't consider "proper." You'll have to decide for yourself how far you want to take this.

At the opposite extreme of things, you need to go out of your way to avoid colloquial phrases or "abused" words. For example, "awake" is more precise than "get up"; "leave" is better than "go out" and so forth. While it's okay to employ these on occasion, try more appropriate words when possible.

I've discovered a list of words that I continually abuse in my writing. I've made up — oops, that should be "created" — a computer file that I pull during the polishing of my final draft.

I use my word processor's search mode to locate these abused words.

For what it's worth, here's the list: just, again, all, as, back, could, would, up, out, down, end, into, while, look, some, small, several, seem, quick, over, made, on, off, only, ready, and take. There are also phrases like "of course" and "in fact" that I use over and over again. Searching through for these is a must as well.

Chances are, you'll have a different set of words. If you're not sure, check a short article with a style checker word frequency counter (if your word processor has this feature) to discover words that appear again and again in your writing.

Sometimes you'll be expected to alter your style for your audience (actually your editor). How informally you write will depend upon the style of the magazine or publication you're working for. This book has been written as if I were talking to you (the reader). Think how different the overall tone would be if, instead of saying "you" I wrote "the reader"; or "one can do this" rather than "you can do this"; or referred to "the author" rather than simply saying "I."

Decide how close you want to be to the reader and adhere to the style your publisher dictates. In general, journals and some professional magazines try to be very formal while how-to articles will be very informal, more like writing a monologue to an intimate friend. But check before you write; the difference could decide whether or not a publisher is going to print what you write.

Unless you're writing a joke book, you probably won't be including much humor in your style. But the most serious of articles can sometimes be propelled along by a mildly humorous story.

The amount of humor and how dry or "black" it should be is up to you and will become, in part, your style over time. Try

to do what you're comfortable with and avoid humor that might be offensive. Humor has to be just right or it fails.

I Got Rhythm

The English language has a few conventions of rhythm and meter that most writers realize and incorporate subconsciously into their voice and style. However, being aware of these can help you reach the point where your writing flows more quickly. And once it flows, what you produce will pass from the company of the standard owner's manual level of writing (or — worse yet — the "encrypted English" of manuals crudely translated into English from another language) to something that is enjoyable to read, if not akin to free verse poetry from time to time.

Probably the best way to achieve this is to read *quality* writing by people who are established writers. Whether fiction or nonfiction, if you read enough good writing, that level of creativity will slowly sink into your mind so you string words together in similar, flowing patterns.

In the meantime, there is one place that will make or break you: Phrases that are lists of words. To flow properly, these should almost always be broken down into groups of twos or threes.

The why of this is uncertain. I suspect that since classical and popular music patterns tend to be grouped in twos and threes, these patterns sound "right" to our ears (making you wonder what a culture with music based on fives and sevens might "hear" as flowing text). At any rate, these patterns tend to sound complete and balanced to your ear.

Here are some examples of duple patterns:

Wet and wild
Smooth and easy

The quick and the dead
The high and the mighty

Likewise groups of three give a completed sound to most people's ears. For example, these all have a nice feel to them:

Blood, sweat, and tears
The good, the bad, and the ugly
Joe, Moe, and Curly

When you break out of these "rhythms," it doesn't "sound" right to your reader. For example, if you had a list like this, "apples, oranges, grapefruit, pears, and grapes" it starts to sound awkward for no good reason. On the other hand, if you break this down into two connected lists, it starts to work in the mental ears of most readers: "apples, oranges, and grapefruit as well as pears and grapes."

Now we have three and two and it just sounds better (to my subjective ear, at least). Notice the trick that was used. A connector like "as well as" puts the two short lists back together. This type of connection can link a group of two or three to one, two, or even three more things — just use some good sense with this.

Whenever you create a list of examples, try to do two or three. If you have a bunch more than this and a connector between two groups doesn't work, then try to get broader categories or even the less elegant (but workable), "etc." Of course, there may be times when you'll need a list of four or five things. But the less of these you produce, the better your writing will flow in the mind of the reader.

In the Beginning

As noted elsewhere, the first chapter is one of the places you need to proofread carefully. Seasoned fiction writers will tell

you that their first chapter sells their book and their last chapter sells their next novel.

The same is true in nonfiction writing. You need to make the introduction to an article, or the first chapter of your book, interesting enough for the reader to keep reading.

This can be done several ways. In fact, a few articles will start with a short story (often even fictional). This story shows why the reader needs to know what's in the article. Provided you don't overuse this technique, it can be quite effective. (Often you may want to finish with the same character, applying the information in your article to solve the problem you had him trying to cope with in the beginning of the story. This has the plus of making the reader see that what he has learned is valuable and might also save his bacon should he be in a similar pickle.)

Most authors require a couple of paragraphs to get "wound up" when starting an article or chapter. Often deleting the first sentences or paragraphs will improve what you've written. Try seeing how much you can delete from the beginning of your first draft without creating problems.

Unfortunately, one of the toughest things in getting writing to "flow" well is cutting the "gems" that you've labored hard to create. Almost always, these will be cute or brilliant phrases that really strike your fancy or show how clever you are.

And don't belong in the final draft.

Learning to swallow your pride and cut these is important. Think of yourself as a surgeon hacking away bits of cancer; cut enough, and you'll save your manuscript's life. (This last sentence about a surgeon hacking at cancerous tissue is one of those I'm hoping you'd have the sense to cut. It's been left to illustrate my point; hopefully there aren't too many others I've left in elsewhere.)

Editing/cutting is a horrible job; especially on your own writing when you know how much time you've spent laboring on it. But such cuts make a more compact, viable piece.

Varying the length of sentences makes a manuscript considerably more interesting to read. Unfortunately, many teachers as well as style checker programs tend to look at long sentences as *always* needing to be broken into shorter pieces. In fact, you'd do well to strive for a mix of sentence structures. Some ought to be short. Others occasionally ramble along almost endlessly, perhaps made up of compound sentences, prepositional phrases, and other such "stuff," which add spice, as they (hopefully) did in this paragraph.

Because today's readers are living in a fast-paced world, I feel breaking paragraphs into shorter sections is a good idea as well. Breaking your paragraphs up can also give a bit of added suspense to the reader.

Like this.

So make paragraphs vary a little along the same lines as sentences.

It's also important to remember that if you have a long paragraph in a double-spaced manuscript, it will become gigantic in a three-column format that most magazines use and may look ponderous in a book as well. Break longer paragraphs into shorter ones so it doesn't look like the indent is broken on the publisher's typesetting machine.

Punctuation should occasionally include exclamation and question marks along with colons and the like for the same purpose. A good manuscript will look interesting even if it isn't being read. My rule of thumb is never have more than one exclamation mark per chapter or article. Beginning writers are especially bad about putting in an exclamation mark at every chance; the fewer you use, the more experienced your editor will think you are.

All Tensed Up

Tenses are always tricky in writing any type of material. They can get especially tricky in nonfiction where you're dealing with a "story" about people or historic events. Then you may discover the need to switch from the past to present or otherwise change tenses to make things make sense.

If your article or book is in the story format throughout, say an autobiographical piece, then you'll probably want to do it all in past tense, showing events that have taken place. This is probably the easiest form to write in, since it is used in most novels and autobiographies. Readers are also used to it and tend to view such writing as more reliable than something written in present tense.

Now don't think present tense is always wrong to use. If you really want to build up tension, present tense can do it. Suppose, for example, you wanted to write about a near meltdown at a nuclear plant; present tense would really up the suspense by making the reader feel as if he's there and the events are unfolding. "Jake walks down the hallway, unaware that just 100 yards away, behind the thick concrete, a disaster of epic proportions is unfolding."

On the other hand, if you were doing a biography, present tense would get old real fast and the reader would probably be ready to quit by chapter two. He might not realize why, but he, if he's like most people, would start to get irritated by this technique simply because it isn't common, except in short articles.

What would be even more disastrous would be switching tenses without a good reason. This is a definite no-no whether you're doing fiction or nonfiction. However, while it is never good practice to switch tenses other than in flashbacks in fic-

tion (well, almost never), there are times when you might need to in nonfiction.

This can occur when you're writing about something that happened in the past but continues to be true or happens in the present. For example, if you were writing a review of an automobile, you might write about the testing you did in past tense (it happened before you wrote the article), but you wouldn't say the car "was reliable," because that suggests it no longer is when the reader will be reading the article. Instead, you would (or should) say that the car "is reliable."

This is a small, but important, change.

There are other, similar times that you'll need to change the tense. You'll probably do this automatically and may not even be aware of what's going on. Don't let it shake you, however, if you go through and see that the tense changes back and forth when writing something other than a biographical, story-style piece.

Chances are those tense changes will make sense when you analyze them. This is not to say that you may not make errors that need to be changed in re-writes. But don't get thrown off just because the tenses change from one point to the next.

First, Second, or Third

With autobiographical articles or books, or other writing that unfolds like a story, you will probably want to use third person (reserving first person for ghost writing autobiographies and the like). With how-to articles, you will probably vary from third to first and even hit some second person (you) from time to time. How-to type material is considerably less restrictive in what you can get away with; biographical material is going to be pretty strict and will tend to keep its tense as well as person consistent through most of the book.

In such a case you'll also do well to adopt a convention used by novels called the "viewpoint" or point of view. Basically what this does is tell your story (at least within each scene) from the perspective of one character, as if the reader is viewing things through a character's eyes — perhaps even being privy to his thoughts?

To pull this off you have to stick with this single character; anything he sees, you let the reader see. Anything he couldn't know or see is withheld from the reader. This continues until the scene changes (a new time or place is encountered) or there is a change of chapters; at that point you can change to another character.

That means each section starts with the viewpoint character and any information that is imparted comes by changing the expressions of those around this central character (as "seen" by the viewpoint character) or through dialogue he has with other characters. Keep the viewpoint consistent as you write and you can make much stronger scenes and also force yourself to "show, not tell" what the character you're writing about is doing.

Setting the Scene

As noted elsewhere, helping the reader create a mental picture will draw him into your writing, making him more apt to complete it (and an editor more apt to buy your manuscript).

One way to do this is to "set the scene" in a nonfiction article. This is done the same way it would be in a short story or novel.

When describing a setting of a story, the novelist picks key sounds and smells, or whatever, that will make the scene seem more real to the reader. As with good fiction, the secret is to give sharp details with only a *few* key things; strangely

enough, this will cause the reader to feel that everything has been described in detail, even though it hasn't. This trick is considerably less boring than a highly itemized account would be. Pick out the most important point, then describe that in detail. Once that is alive in the reader's mind, his brain fleshes out everything else.

Let's suppose your article is about a basketball player who, when you meet him, seems like a giant. That's the point you want to convey to your reader. Simply saying he's tall fails to do the trick. But if you write that he "towers over those around him, looking like a fairy tale giant in a three-piece suit," then you've given the reader a precise mental picture that will start his mind's eye to filling in the blanks so he also sees the lighting, the player's face, and the room you're in (or which the reader imagines you in). Now the article is alive and he's going to want to read more.

Likewise, if you were reporting on work conditions that are tense, it's preferable to describe the nervous gestures of employees, their tics, and other signs of strain. You want to show the image, not just tell the reader that "Everyone looked tense."

Show, not tell, remember?

Describing what's going on also makes your writing sound less subjective and more objective. You appear to the reader to be giving the facts and allowing the reader to come to the same conclusions you have (even though it isn't actually the case in some ways — though certainly you should be presenting the picture you saw, telling the truth as you believe it happened, it isn't quite as objective as it will appear to the reader).

Always avoid inserting any "editorial criticism" into your story; just give the facts and the reader should reach about the same conclusion you have if you feel strongly about a subject you've written about. For example, you might realize that a

person you're interviewing is always bad-mouthing his competition. You might write something like:

Joe Smith was always critical of his competitors...

But it is going to have more effect on the reader, and make you sound more objective, if you can make the reader see this the same way you do. So quote him several times criticizing his competitors:

"Those guys are always doing the wrong thing," Joe Smith laughed, pointing to the catalog of X Enterprises, the business that competes with Smith's. "And those guys at Y Incorporated are a bunch of clowns, too."

Now your readers are going to start to see what you saw, and reach that same conclusion without your hammering them over the head with the fact.

It's also generally wise to "understate" things, not overstate them. Nothing ruins a good story (or, at least, turns it into a "tall tale") faster than exaggeration. Resist the temptation to say something is the biggest, best, or whatever — even if it is.

The only exception to this is when the reader will understand that you're exaggerating. For example, in the giant basketball player example above, the athlete isn't really as tall as a fairy tale giant. But the reader will understand that, so I could get away with such an outlandish statement. On the other hand, if I suggested that he was "most likely the tallest man living," there would instantly be some doubt in many reader's minds, wondering if perhaps, somewhere, there might not be someone just a tad taller, waiting to be discovered.

When possible avoid coming right out and declaring something the best, biggest, most valuable, or whatever it may be; present your case and then let the reader draw his own conclusions. Today's readers are already bombarded by "bigger and better" products through advertising. The less of this in your writing, the more credible it'll seem to a reader.

Know Thy Audience

Knowing what audience you'll be writing for is important. Always think about who is reading (or who the editor thinks is reading) a publication.

Imagine you're writing about why the U.S. Air Force discontinued its investigation into whether or not UFOs are alien space ships. You'd adopt a different slant if you were writing for *The Skeptic* magazine, where most readers already are convinced that UFOs are hoaxes, than you would for a newsletter devoted to readers who believe there is life on other planets.

Your conclusion that UFOs are not genuine spaceships from other worlds might be the same in both articles; all the same facts might be in both. But the life-on-other-planets newsletter article would need to have a bit less harshness to it and might even speculate that, maybe someday, a real flying saucer might one day be seen. Your facts are in both, but you don't beat either group of readers over the head with them.

The way you present ideas can also be affected by your audience. If you're writing for a magazine where the readers are familiar with how a computer functions, you could do away with much of your explanations of the more common aspects of computer operation. Conversely, if you were writing for a group of people who are "computer illiterates," you'd need to explain each step of the way. Failure to write toward your audience will either insult them or lose them almost from the first.

Sometimes, you'll be writing for a very broad audience. Then you'll need to explain everything down to whatever level seems likely to be the "minimal" knowledge for most readers. One technique to keep from insulting the more erudite readers

is to start with a phrase such as "most readers know" before your basic explanations.

Once you've "admitted" that you recognize some readers will already understand the more elementary explanations, you can dispense with such introductory phrases. The more knowledgeable reader will no longer feel that you're talking down to him.

To keep the knowledgeable reader along with the "beginner" interested in what you're writing, articles aimed at "general" audiences should have information that will challenge almost everyone who will be reading what you write. This isn't always viable. But whenever practical, try to get facts or stories into your article that haven't appeared elsewhere.

Refining

After you've got your rough draft finished, it's time to go through and carefully rewrite it. If you keep reworking even the crudest of material, eventually you'll assemble a readable article. Always keep working until your manuscript is polished and as close to perfect as you can achieve. This is one thing that separates the writers from the mice (to murder a cliché).

Rewriting means you'll be sending quality stuff to editors. Don't slack off after that first draft. The real labor is yet to come.

One of the secrets of this "polishing" is to read your first draft as if it's the first time *you* are reading it. Check that it's easy to understand who or what the "they," "he," or "it" actually is. Reading aloud may also help out here as a different part of your brain is called into play, making it easier to spot some mistakes or discover awkward word combinations.

Check to see all your phrases are in the right spot. Don't be guilty of writing in the confusing style of many of today's

journalists. For example, "the dog eats anything and loves children"; does the dog really love to eat children?

And "the shot was reported by an unidentified driver on Bay Street" doesn't convey its message as clearly as "an unidentified driver reported a shot being fired on Bay Street." Likewise, "At age three, the Smith family adopted the child" makes it sound like the Smiths were three when they adopted a child.

The English language can be very ambiguous even when used properly. The old "limbless lady killer" story is a good example of this. As it progresses, the listener discovers that everyone has a different idea of who or what the limbless lady killer is.

- The criminal can be a limbless killer who murders ladies.
- A limbless lady who is a murderer.
- A murderer who only kills limbless ladies.

In the English language, a "limbless lady killer" could be any of these. Your job is to be sure that the meaning is tacked down exactly so your reader doesn't have to guess.

Another thing to watch for is a repeated word in the same sentence. The sentence, "An automobile driver has a love affair with his automobile," sounds inferior to "An automobile driver has a love affair with his car." The same information is in both versions, but the last is more enjoyable to the reader since "automobile" isn't repeated.

Ditto with starting consecutive sentences with the same word. The English language is rich in words (many looted from other languages); use all those available to you.

While a few writers have adopted a voice that takes advantage of being a know-it-all, generally this isn't going to sit too well with readers. Don't sound too sure of yourself or make things seem too pat. The sentence several lines above, for example, is less dogmatic if you write, "Many a driver has a love

affair with his car" or "A driver can have a love affair with his car."

Whenever feasible, avoid plurals in sentences, as these can confuse the reader. "Many a driver has a love affair with his car" is clearer than "Many drivers have love affairs with their cars." When the plurals are added, we're not sure if several drivers have joint ownership of the cars, have more than one car, or what. Don't assume that your reader will be able to sort it out. Get it as clear as possible; if there's any room for doubt, explain things fully.

Working to Length

Remember that editors, especially magazine editors, have a specific amount of space to fill. While modern layout programs give them more leeway than was enjoyed in the past, they're still up the creek if you submit work that is way too long or way too short. You must work to produce material the exact length needed by the publication.

Beginning writers generally realize that too short is bad, but fail to see that too long is an equal sin. The reason is that editors don't have time to do much editing these days. Editors have minimal staffs and are under pressure to produce in a hurry while spending a minimum of money. They're concerned about keeping the project within budget, getting readers to buy the publication on the newsstand, and in-house politics.

They don't have the time to go through an article that's five pages too long to figure out what to cut. They might be able to take up the slack elsewhere by making pictures smaller or whatever. But chances are good you'll be on their bad side for some time to come.

With books and manuals, things are more flexible. However, even here you'll be in trouble if your publisher wants a 200-page manuscript and you send in 100 or 300 pages. Learn to pace yourself and leave out material that isn't important, coming back and adding it if you need to increase the size of the manuscript after covering the major points you needed to make.

Today's Editors

The little time editors have to do their work means they can generally only correct a few typos that got past you. If you send in a manuscript that is polished and ready to go, then you've helped them stay on schedule and they're going to want to do more business with you.

If you send in a manuscript with too many words, a lot of grammar errors, or in need of any type of re-working, it's going to be unwelcome if not rejected. There are plenty of writers these days and the editor doesn't have time to do major edits of your work.

This doesn't mean he's mad at you or out to get you. He isn't going to steal your idea. He just is too short of time to accept anything other than manuscripts that are nearly ready for the typesetter.

Obtaining this near perfection in your articles will demand less and less time as you become a more talented writer. This is because you'll gradually learn to do much of your rough draft correctly the first go around. Too, style and spell checkers will actually help improve your writing, since you'll have your nose rubbed in your mistakes and be called upon to change them when using either of these programs. (Critics of word processors when they first were adopted maintained

these gadgets would ruin writers; in fact they improve writing.)

Once you've got the hang of writing, you'll need less time for polishing rough drafts.

Photographs

Whether electronic or prints, photos are tricky to deal with. If you're not careful, photos can get into print with the wrong captions and even (on occasion) reversed or upside down.

The best bet is to note in a manuscript the approximate area a photo should go and place its caption at that point, along with the name of the photo file (if it is digital) or the number of the picture (if it is printed). If you have a large manuscript, you can also note the manuscript page number for each photo so the editor won't have trouble figuring where to place it (though generally I find the first way of doing things easier for both the writer and the editor).

Captions can also be placed directly onto photos by typing the caption onto a 3M "Post-It" 3x5-inch memo pad. Each sheet will stick to its photo but can be easily removed when it comes time for the printer to work with it; in such a case you may wish to also place a copy of the caption in a caption file or in the manuscript itself so the publisher will be able to easily manipulate the caption text without having someone reenter it (and perhaps make errors in the process).

With printed photos, it's also wise to place a code letter on the back of the photo and key it into the Post-It sheet. That way if the two get separated, they can be matched up by the publisher.

Print photos (as well as the final manuscript if you're mailing one) should be sandwiched between slabs of cardboard to keep them from becoming dog-eared on their journey through

the mail. If you have photos, give them extra protection from bending, with sheets of cardboard, and put a "Photos: Do Not Bend" on both the front and back of the envelope.

If photos could be hard to replace, it's wise to send them by insured mail; this enables you to collect a little money for your time if you have to replace the pictures due to a postal disaster.

If you've written a large manuscript that the editor wanted printed out, and you have a bunch of photos to accompany it, you'll need to put everything into a box and ship it. It's tempting to send such a large parcel by third- or fourth-class mail. But you'll be better off with first-class or priority mail. Not only will the manuscript get where it's going more quickly (days rather than weeks), the package will be handled more gently. Your manuscript and photos are less apt to be damaged if sent via first-class delivery.

Express mail is necessary if you're really pushing a deadline. But express mail often isn't much faster than first-class and will eat into the profits you'll earn. Don't be tempted to try to impress an editor with express mail; the only person you'll impress is a secretary.

Since there's invariably a worry that a manuscript is lost in the mail, at least consider purchasing one of the small cards offered by the post office that will be returned by the receiver of your manuscript when it's delivered. These cards aren't expensive and will let you know when the manuscript arrived at your editor's office. (If you want to save a bit, you can include a return card for the editor to mail when receiving your manuscript. But, unfortunately, many editors don't do this, so it isn't sure fire.)

Fortunately, more and more publishers permit sending electronic copies of manuscripts to them as e-mail attachments or (more rarely) by putting the information at an FTP site on the Internet. This is faster and considerably less expensive; always inquire if this is possible when working with a new publisher.

Blurbs

If you've written a book under contract (so you know it'll go into print), you may wish to include a small "blurb" for your publisher's catalog or advertising. Make it clear that the blurb is being sent on the off chance that it will be of help (so the publisher won't think you're insisting it be used). Often the publisher will appreciate this little extra, since it makes it easier to get your book into its catalog; some editors also write the blurb for a book — they'll be especially appreciative if you do this.

To find what to write about your book in an ad blurb, look at other write-ups for the company's *successful* titles (i.e., those that have been in its catalog a long time and which get lots of advertising space). Use a blurb for a subject similar to yours and then plug in the specifics for your book.

Here's a short catalog ad from one of my gun manuals to give you an idea of what you might do with a nonfiction book aimed at a wide range of readers:

THE AR-7 SUPER SYSTEMS
by Duncan Long

The lightweight AR-7 has long been a favorite of survivalists, pilots, and explorers. Now firearms expert Duncan Long reveals his secrets about the AR-7 and its sister pistol, the Explorer II, and shows you how to modify either gun to suit YOUR needs.

This book gives you the straight, no-holds-barred assessment of the capabilities of the AR-7 and takes a look at custom and spin-off versions of the firearm as well. Long shows how to improve the AR-7, how to upgrade its reliability, and how to use one as the basis of a one-of-a-kind exotic weapon. Included in the book are the secrets of buying one of these guns

used, an outline of custom and do-it-yourself modifications of the firearms, and a detailed list and assessment of accessories available for these guns.

Invaluable to the owner or would-be buyer of an AR-7 or Explorer II, this book goes well beyond the owner's manual to show not only how to field strip these guns, but how to detail strip, reassemble, and troubleshoot them — with a minimum of fuss. And you'll find a detailed history of ArmaLite and the development of the AR-7 here as well.

Whether you're looking for a weapon to get you out of a tight spot, are an explorer looking for a rugged survival gun, or are just interested in creating an inexpensive recreational firearm, this is a book that belongs on your bookshelf.

[5½ x 8½, soft cover, illus., photos, etc., etc., ...]

Now a few notes on blurb writing:

- Don't be afraid of tooting your own horn in an ad. You don't want to get carried away, of course. But if you've made a name for yourself, or your books are sold around the world, take advantage of the facts and let readers who don't recognize your name discover who you are.
- Note that the blurb tries to capture as large a share of the market as is possible. Instead of telling the reader that anyone who's interested in this single type of gun will like the book, I tried to pull in a wider group, many of whom might not even own the gun, with the phrase: "survivalists, pilots, and explorers."
- You need to establish that the reader ("*you*" in the blurb) will be interested in *this* book. Notice how the word "you" is employed regularly and the last paragraph outlines all the reasons "you" should buy the book.

About You

To give yourself a bit more credibility with readers *and* help secure secondary sales of your other books, include a small "about the author" page and perhaps a list of other of your publications when you send in your book manuscript. (Assuming that the publisher has printed the "about the author" and the titles list I sent with this manuscript, you should be able to find a sample of these at the front or back of this book).

This should make you look like "Joe Average" in some ways while also establishing that you have a track record of success in what you do and are somewhat of an expert in the area covered by the book.

Kill Fees

If you write an article or book under contract and the editor or publisher doesn't use it, often they'll pay you a "kill fee." This payment is generally considerably less than what the article would have paid if it had gone into print but (in theory at least) the author still has the article that can be sold to another publisher.

Sometimes the writer can sell the article, but often it is so specific that this is hard to do. On the other hand, many editors don't even offer a kill fee, so when it does come it should be viewed as generosity on the publisher's part. It's better to get into print, but it's nice to have some cash if your article doesn't go to print.

Being the Expert

"Expert" is a loaded term. In reality, it means anyone who knows a lot about a subject. There's no big deal to being an

expert. But the word has taken on a sort of "super star" status in some fields. A word to the wise: let other people call you an expert. Don't refer to yourself as an expert. People value humility and hate vanity.

Once you carve a niche in your area of "expertise," readers will seek other books you've written and publishers may ask you to write for them. This whole process will gradually snowball with people in the industry or area you're covering recognizing your name and feeding you information. At this point you'll start having inside information and your articles will be of greater interest to your readers.

Best of all, becoming an expert in one or more fields will minimize your research time and expenses. Your knowledge, stored data in your computer, and your "private reference library" of magazines and books will be useful for similar writing projects. (Of course, you don't want to limit yourself too much. If interest in a subject area drops, you don't want to be limited to that niche. So whenever possible, try to become an "expert" in several fields rather than one.)

Another plus of becoming an "expert" is in your greater ability to obtain samples of products. These are from companies whose products you may be covering. Computer software, electronic equipment, cameras, or whatever you write about may be available on loan from various companies (the practice varies according to what publishers you write for, the cost of the product, and how easy it is to ship).

Obviously, getting free samples can save you time in rounding up materials to write about. It also can save you a lot of expense if you were going to write about these (or similar items) anyway. Suddenly the money you would have spent on them is now free to spend on something else — like new clothing, eating out, or whatever. Free samples are like a bonus check from your editor.

Obtaining samples is much like landing writing projects. You collect magazines and check ads, seeing what's available in the area you'll be writing about. You collect the company name and address, then write a letter describing the articles you've already got in print and the project you're working on that will include their product. To get a company to help you out with sample products, you *must* have a contract (or at least a go-ahead from a magazine editor). This will allow you to give your editor's name and address, so manufacturers can double-check with your "boss" to be sure you're a legitimate writer. (In the past, "writers" have received sample projects and then never got their articles in print. This has stained the reputation of authors in general and made it hard for legitimate authors to get sample products.)

Of course, a sample product can become like a land mine waiting for you to step on it. While some products like computer software, books, or VCR movies aren't in danger of being "doctored" so they will appear better or function more reliably than the product being sold to the public, some are.

A car, gun, or eggbeater, for example, might be reworked so it functions flawlessly. An author receiving such a "ringer" will write a glowing report of how well it works. Readers run out and buy this super product and find the quality control on the assembly line is so poor the little jewel won't even operate as it comes from the box. (Don't laugh, this has happened more often than one likes to admit.)

What do you think the readers write to the editor? What do you think he will do next time you submit a product review? You will learn what the word "rejection" really means.

The solution to this problem is to have access to other users of such equipment and, if possible, purchase "off the shelf" examples of the product to test with your sample. This will regularly enable the writer to detect flaws that may not show in the sample product.

Most manufacturers will expect you to return the sample. Others will let you keep it. If you're allowed to keep the sample, it's best to hang onto it; often you'll need the sample for photos in subsequent articles or in other areas of your writing. (Having a manufacturer call and ask for a sample back, or ask you to try another product with it, can be pretty sticky if you've given the original sample to a friend.)

Occasionally you may receive several samples that you can't use. In such a case, you may be able to turn around and sell or trade these. Whenever possible, trade these for something similar that you can use to write another article about and be very, very certain that you won't be needing the sample for future writing projects.

Trading a business sample for another you'll write about is not a taxable transaction. But if you do sell the sample, be sure to keep careful records since this will amount to income that must be reported on your income tax. (Writers are among the groups that are habitually audited. Be sure to keep careful records of everything and don't be tempted to cheat on reporting on income from writing. If you want to dodge taxes, writing isn't the field to be in.)

Occasionally a manufacturer will send out a sample product that's a dog. If you're going to have a less than favorable report, it's wise to return the sample, even if it was given to you, and explain what the problems were. Many manufacturers are responsive to a writer's ideas and will improve their products down the road.

With this in mind, some writers only give good reviews of products. The argument goes like this: You don't want to pan the product if it will be improved in the future *and* there are already many quality products that should be reviewed. Therefore, writing is limited to mentioning the best products. There's merit to this route and it should be considered.

Yes, some writers can convince themselves of this (and I had one editor explain to me that this was how things were done at his publication — and I didn't do any product reviews for him after that). I never agree to do a review that has the positive outcome guaranteed. If I'm not sold on it, I say so. If the editor won't let me say so, then that review doesn't get into print.

You may not feel the necessity to be so rigid. But think things through before agreeing to any practice like this. It is your name, not the editor's or manufacturer's that will be hurt by a review that is too rosy.

On the flip side is the corrupting influence of samples. The tendency is to be prejudiced to give an extra edge to "freebies" over competition from companies who haven't been generous in sending you a sample. Chances are, you'll not be able to be completely impartial. But you should be as objective as possible. If you have trouble doing this, then you shouldn't ask for samples; it's better to borrow products from friends or spend money on purchasing them than to lose your reputation of being impartial.

One final pitfall to sample products: sometimes, a friend or business acquaintance will offer to "help" you with your research. This sounds innocent enough.

It isn't.

What happens is they contact a manufacturer and ask them to send out a sample product because your "friend" is helping you write an article. Then your "helper" keeps the product and — most often — the manufacturer blames you for not getting the information into the article, your friend's damage of the sample, or not returning the sample if it was only a loaner.

And you may not even see the product to actually test it. Therefore you have to go by your friend's evaluation, even though you don't know how well he really tested the product.

Needless to say, such "help" creates a mess. Be sure you always work only with people you trust. And should someone announce that they have decided to "help" you by asking for a sample to be sent to them on your behalf, always contact the manufacturer at once to let them know that the "friend" does not represent you. (You may think such an occurrence is not apt to happen. I've twice had such "assistants," both times with disastrous results.)

Chapter Six
Branching Out

I have a friend who was a career military officer. After he retired, he didn't rest on his laurels. He started a gunsmith/locksmith operation that he runs from his garage and he started a construction company with several crews of men working in various parts of the city (my friend uses his cell phone and drives from one site to the other to supervise their work during the day). He also opened an insurance agency that eventually bought out one of his competitors.

He uses a phone answering machine and makes appointments with people wanting to purchase firearms, obtain help with locks, or have home improvements contracted. When computers became important to running a business, my friend purchased a PC, took courses in accounting, and started a modest investment firm. This last project has been so lucrative that he's selling his construction company so he can devote most of his time to helping people invest their money wisely.

Instead of sitting back and living off his retirement funds, this entrepreneur has amassed a fortune. You might not be able to amass a fortune as a nonfiction writer, but with some effort, you should be able to make a good living.

You can go one of several directions. One is to diversify; write in three or four unrelated areas. Many lines of research

and industry will go through times of slump. Diversifying keeps you from "having all your (writing) eggs in one basket." If a magazine fails or the public loses interest in a subject, it won't leave you short of cash.

Another route of diversifying is to hold a job and augment your pay with earnings from nonfiction writing projects. This is done by people in various industries. In addition to putting a little extra cash into your pocket, it's a commendable method of placing your (and your company's) name in the public's eyes through an avenue other than advertising. And when you retire from your job, you'll have a skill that can be turned into a hobby or even continue to earn you generous amounts of money.

If you're a full-time writer, there are means to augment your income as well. One is to become a consultant. Many authors have found they can earn cash as consultants in the field they've covered in their publications. This makes sense. Often authors have become experts on the subject of their articles by the time they've thoroughly researched it.

A little judgment must be exercised, of course. If you don't feel like you're capable of acting as a consultant, you shouldn't take such jobs. This is especially true if the field is dangerous or one where lawsuits could be brought against you because of your poor judgments or suggestions. Then it's wise *not* to operate as a consultant.

If you opt to take on consultation work, how do you break into the market? One system for doing this is to make a business arrangement with your publisher to split your consultation fees if the publisher sends the jobs your direction. This is easy to do. The publisher just places a direct response coupon in the back of each of your books.

The coupon ought to have space for name, address, etc., along with the publisher's address. The page is a "mini ad" explaining to the reader the service you have available, the

benefits to be derived from hiring you as consultant, and how to contact you (via the publisher).

Those readers interested in the service then send in the coupons to the publisher, who sorts them, possibly by phone contact. (In order to be sure the reader is serious, it's wise to have a "cover charge" requiring a token amount of cash to be sent. This will separate the curious from the serious.)

When qualified prospects send in the coupon, the publisher then passes the person to you. You then handle the contract with your publisher and give him a cut of the deal. (Or, if the publisher diplomatically expresses doubts as to whether or not you'll split the income, you can let him handle that end of things. You'll be able to tell whether or not they're being fair, since you'll be doing the consulting.)

Most consultation work will be done over the phone or through correspondence. Direct face-to-face or "on site" jobs will merit much higher fees. Be sure this is fully outlined and, if possible, have all fees paid *before* the consultation is done, or work out a half-up-front, half-on-completion policy.

Of course, you don't have to be dependent on your publisher to gather consulting jobs. You can also advertise in magazines (those same ones you've used to locate manufacturers and publishers!). Place a small ad in the magazine along with a list of your qualifications, including your major publications in the field.

A related type of consultant work is to act as an expert witness. Again, advertising in a few publications read by lawyers will do the trick here. One piece of advice (from bitter experience); have lawyers pay you up front and by the hour. I've been "stiffed" several times by lawyers who used my name and the threat of information I'd collected to get a suit settled out of court — leaving me nothing, since my pay was contin-

gent on giving testimony in the courtroom. I won't make that mistake again.

Guru

Other similar employment an author can engage in includes conducting seminars or workshops. A number of companies will be interested in hiring an "expert" to bring their employees up to speed. Likewise, schools often have lyceums where an "expert" lectures (usually with audio visual equipment or sample products to keep everyone's attention).

Writer's Digest offers writing seminars. By contacting the magazine, you might be able to be hired for one of these. Many colleges and universities will also conduct writing workshops or invite guest lecturers to speak to students. Long Ridge Writing Institute (not related to the author in any way) also hires writers who have material in print, to teach beginners, letting you work out of your home, grading packages of assignments that are delivered to your doorstep by the postman.

To land any of these, you need to do research to locate potential jobs, and then send a cover letter to various companies, schools, or organizations along with a list of your qualifications. (This process is nearly identical to acquiring a writing contract for a book proposal. Be sure to include an SASE; this will improve your response rate.)

You could even land a job at a university as a teacher if you have a degree in English or Journalism. This gets a little iffy, however; there're more people capable of talking about writing than there are authors. (Too, some college department heads are jealous of those who actually make a living at writing rather than only getting published in non-paying journals.

It's sad to say that this jealousy will often blackball your chances of securing a teaching position.)

Although the money is inferior, you may discover that you can appear on TV or radio talk programs if you're very successful at writing *or* have a book of special interest to the public. These appearances will often not even pay your traveling expenses. However, if you're writing for a large publisher, you may be able to finagle travel credit from an editor since you'll be helping book sales. If you want to see the world, this is one way to do it. A few authors even manage to become celebrities in their own right. Just be sure making your appearances is worthwhile to you; they eat up time.

Fiction?

A few nonfiction writers discover they have a flair for producing fiction. If you have this desire, you've got most of the "hardware" and talents you'll need for writing fiction. *Writer's Digest* (and the books offered by its in-house publishing company) is again a source of how-to information about writing fiction.

Fiction is not quite the same as nonfiction. Fictional accounts need more detail and must create believable characters. The research isn't as hard and you can get away with bending things to suit your needs; but fiction isn't easy by any stretch of the imagination.

On the other hand, you'll already have the researching skills for obtaining the sharp details of specific fields and areas of the world. This can be a big advantage because details are of major interest to readers of fiction.

You can even couple your nonfiction research with your fiction writing. For example, if you've been researching and

writing about the tuna industry, you could create a character who's a tuna fisherman. You could give him character flaws and a major problem (the bank preparing to foreclose on his boat loan, say). Then you could create a short story or even a book around this basic idea coupled with the details you've learned that will enable you to write a realistic piece that gives readers a view of an industry most will know nothing about.

Unlike most fiction authors, who know little of the industry they set their characters in, you could write with sharp details, naming the parts of the boat, detailing fishing methods, and elaborating on how the catch is stored and sold. You wouldn't want to bombard the reader with such details, but you can drop in nuggets that give insight into what type of life a modern fisherman lives, making the whole thing an interesting read.

There are a couple of potential pitfalls. One is that the fiction book market, due to poor marketing practices that haven't changed much from the 1930s, has been both tight and in a slump over the last decade (as this is written); hopefully this may change, but it might not any time soon. Already e-zines on the Internet are starting to open more opportunities for short story writers and the Net may also become a serious way of launching new novels as well.

A second problem is that as things now stand, nearly all fiction is sold through an agent. And literary agents handle only established writers, bringing us back to that Catch-22 situation that makes breaking into the fiction market a seemingly impossible task (with a glimmer of hope appearing with the Internet here as well). Even so, you'll have a slight edge by having nonfiction work in print. Therefore, you might see success in contacting an agent and attempting to get him to handle your work. (Check elsewhere in this book to see how to locate agents.)

That said, it seems likely that "e-books" or marketing over the Internet may make it possible for a future growth in the fiction industry, as smaller publishers take up where the large houses have stumbled. At that point, you should consider jumping into the fiction market.

An e-book is an electronic file — similar to the manuscript you create with a word processor. As such it can be uploaded or downloaded over the Internet to and from computers (or, in some cases, to special "readers" not much larger than a paperback for easy reading). In addition to being read on a reader or computer, it is also possible to print the e-book out on a home printer, creating a stack of pages that can be read almost anywhere. Since there is nothing to be printed or stored other than one copy on the seller's computer, those selling e-books have little to lose and everything to gain in adding a book to their catalog.

Unlike publishers of traditional books that lose money when a book flops, leaving them with copies that have to be discarded, an e-book publisher incurs no such losses and thus can gamble a little to edit and market a book that might — or might not — do well. Furthermore, they can keep an e-book in their catalog for years or decades, letting it slowly generate money for them and their author, rather than simply ditching it if it doesn't generate money in a hurry, as is the case with the traditional publisher. (I suspect that having books available for longer periods will also generate money from e-books that appear to be failures at first, but then gradually pick up a following as they are "discovered" by critics, tastes and fashions change to accommodate a piece that was ahead of its time, or the e-book becomes a "cult" hit. These things can't happen with traditional publishers who let books go out of print if they fail to gain sales within a few months of being released.)

As this is written, there are a variety of formats being used for e-books and no one format has become a standard. If and when that happens, e-books hopefully will explode onto the market, much as the MP3 downloads of music have. At that point, writers may see a new golden age when any quality novel or nonfiction book can be "published" and viewed by a niche of readers who are small percentage-wise but who make the book viable due to their numbers worldwide.

There are a couple of catches to watch for when you're looking for an e-book publisher. First of all you should look at the percentage of money you'll get on each sale and weigh this against the number of books that the publisher can sell due to the popularity of a site. Volume of sales can greatly offset a larger percentage from a publisher with few sales.

Second you should seek a publisher that upholds the traditional publishing idea that books should be selected on merit and professionally edited. Unfortunately, some electronic publishers have simply become dumping grounds for books of low quality with little or no editing beyond what was done in proofreading by the author. While there may be diamonds in the rough here and there in such repositories, finding them will be too time consuming and frustrating for most visitors, making sales doubtful. Obviously, you don't want that type of publisher.

I would also advise against e-book publishers that require a fee from authors. This is currently being done with the argument that it will divide the serious from the amateur. In fact, it is simply dividing the amateur from his money for the most part, putting poorly written material on the Net while bilking money from those who produced it.

My advice is to avoid such a system because most readers aren't going to be patient with a system that charges them money for a document that may — but probably won't be — worth reading. (I suspect that the feeling of being "ripped off"

by poorly written books will also encourage piracy by people who feel that sharing material is justified to make up for the many times they've felt cheated in buying a poorly written book. In such a case it will be the good writers whose e-books are bootlegged who will lose. Don't be one of them.)

Publishers, whether of traditional books or e-books, should pay the author, not the other way around. When authors are asked to cough up money on a system that is supposed to be generating money, something is wrong. You're looking at a vanity press situation where the money is most likely being made from those doing the writing, not from customers buying the books.

Editing

Some writers become editors.

"Editor" is a term that covers a wide range of duties. When we think of an "editor," most of us picture the head or senior editor — the guy who decides what does and does not go into print.

In fact, there are editors and there are EDITORS. If you land an editing job, you'll likely start doing line editing (also known as "copy editing" or "micro editing") for most large publishers. Line editing is basically glorified proofreading. The line editor goes through a manuscript line by line and checks the dots and iotas to be sure everything is right. Additionally, he'll check to be sure phrases are correct, subjects agree with verbs, etc.

One type of editing that many nonfiction writers feel at home with is a "fact checker" or "technical editor." This is the person who investigates manuscripts to be sure that the details and facts are correct. Nonfiction writers have the skills needed

to do this and should consider augmenting their salaries with such jobs — or even doing it full time.

Any one publisher will be limited in the number of manuscripts you're qualified to do technical editing on. Therefore, you'd best operate on a freelance basis. This means you'll need to contact a number of companies who publish books you could check, and offer your services. (Use the same basic techniques for locating these publishers as you would for finding a freelance writing project.)

While you may not land enough jobs to support you full time as a technical editor, a few jobs can augment your writing income. They also give you a break from writing and allow you to see how other authors' work measures up to your own.

One excellent book for anyone interested in editing is *The Elements of Editing : A Modern Guide for Editors and Journalists* by Arthur Plotnik, (MacMillan Distribution; ISBN: 0028614518, May 1997). This manual gives a wealth of "how to" as far as editing, and even surveys legal ramifications of editorial errors, use of a modern library system, and the various types of editing assignments you might face. It's a must for those interested in editing anything from a newsletter to books or manuals (and also is good to have to interpret the odd markings on your own manuscripts when you get them back from an editor — and also to make corrections of your own on the final proof).

Publisher

A few writers go so far as to create their own publishing business (and this author actually got his start this way). As mentioned earlier, vanity presses are notorious for ripping off authors. They're *not* the way to get into print. What we're dis-

cussing here is printing a book yourself by handling the details each step of the way.

Now most authors turn pale at the thought of running a printing press, setting plates, and the like. But you don't have to do that. In fact, many publishers hire independent printers to do this for them. A writer can do the very same thing these publishers do.

What's really necessary is to write your book and then have a qualified printer take it from there. Thanks to today's word processor, art, and publishing software, you can produce your own camera-ready copy, ready for an independent printer to transform into a book for you.

Most printers will be able to work from a computer file you produce in a format his equipment can handle. However, you can also spend a little extra and go with "camera-ready" pages. These are sheets that you print from your home printer, then take to the independent press where they are photographed with offset cameras and used to print a page. (This type of work is quickly vanishing, so chances are you will be producing a computer file for this work — however, it is good to know what the press operator is talking about if he asks about "camera-ready" material.)

The secret is to find a printer who'll sit down with you and discuss what size of margins you need in your layout, number of pages, and so forth for your final book. Once you know what's needed, you produce this from your manuscript and take it to him on a file — or perhaps even FTP it to his Internet site (he can also explain how this is done if you don't know already).

Finding a competent printer who has competitive prices isn't always easy. Check your phone book and make some calls. Ask for prices *and* the names of customers you can call

for references. There is a wide range of both quality, service, and prices among printers. It's wise to shop around.

Occasionally, you may find an expert printer who lives some distance from you; remember that if his prices are competitive, it can be less expensive to have him do the job and then rent a truck or have the books delivered to your doorstep via UPS.

One more thought about printers: it seems that they are almost always behind. (One sage once remarked that the gestation time for a baby who'll become a printer is thirteen months.) So don't set deadlines that will ruin your marketing/business plans if a book comes in a month or two past when it was supposed to be in print.

Of course, your final book will be only as good as the editing and layout you do. Make sure you really go over everything and have it right. Changing things in the computer is easy; changing them once the ink is put to the paper of a book is impossible.

There is a wide range of ways to market your books if you go into self-publishing. While you might sell a few of your volumes by going to various book stores and asking them to carry your tome, you'll be able to make *real* money only if you sell via mail-order or over the Internet (or both). The quickest and easiest way is to let a large organization like Amazon.com market your printed books, shipping them copies along with your advertising copy and price list and letting them take it from there.

Often you can also find mail-order companies that sell books like yours. Finding these companies is basically the same technique outlined elsewhere in this manual: Locate the magazines covering the same subject your book addresses and then pinpoint the book companies advertising in the publication. (Even if companies have turned down your book idea rather than printing it themselves, they may be interested in

adding your edition of the volume to their catalog since they avoid the expense of producing and printing it and therefore are only gambling a few inches in their catalog. Most publishers don't mind taking on this diminutive risk.)

Of course, there's the potential for earning more money by cutting out the middleman. The easiest method of doing this is to create a mail-order company and place small ads in magazines or on Web sites that are related to the subject your book is about. To earn the maximum potential from your self-published book, you'll advertise it yourself. Writing the ads isn't too hard if you use another mail-order company's ad as a model and adapt it to your tome.

The cheapest and most cost effective ad is the classified ad. It doesn't pull a lot of orders but it pulls more per dollar spent than a display ad will. So try a classified ad in a magazine first. If the classified ad pulls well, consider a display ad in the magazine. If it pulls poorly, don't be tempted to go with a more expensive display ad since you'll be throwing your money away.

If a display ad looks like it would have merit, a good art or publishing program will let you lay out your own copy and create camera-ready material (or simply a computer file) to send to the magazine you want your ad to appear in. Or you can hire an advertising firm to create the ad — but be prepared to spend serious money if you go this route.

Ads should be keyed so you can see how well they're doing. The "key" is a letter or number added to your address (the old standby is "Department" so-and-so). Each magazine ad should have its own key and have a letter or digit to show what month the ad appeared in the magazine. You can then tell in which magazines and months your ads are doing well and place future ads accordingly.

In general, mail-order ads will probably pull worst in December, July, June, and August. But it's wise to check. Also, remember that the cover date on a magazine may be a month or more ahead of when the magazines actually are distributed.

Books are best mailed via the "Special 4th Class Book Rate" offered by the post office. The catch is it is extremely slow and packages shipped via fourth-class mail arrive at their destination looking like they spent time in a chimpanzee's cage. So use tough shipping containers and allow time for the book to get there. Add a "Return Postage Guaranteed" to the package. This will cost you a bit, but it's generally less than your book is worth. And it also enables you to discover which books didn't reach their destination due to a customer having given you a wrong address, or other error.

You'd be wise to brush up on mail-order rules. Post offices will have a booklet of facts you need to know. Current mail-order law requires you send your book to a customer within 30 days of receiving his order or notify him that the order will be late and offer a refund of his money if he doesn't wish to wait around.

The main consideration to staying in business is to send books after checks sent to pay for them have had time to clear the bank (cash or money orders are no problem). Don't fool with CODs; people often order via COD and then refuse to accept the package because they've changed their minds or forgotten they ordered. And the post office's paper work for a COD package is an abomination.

You can, of course, cut out more middlemen by going with the production of e-books on your own Web site. This does away with the costs of printing and mailing books. There are even off-the-shelf "shopping cart" programs that make it easy to set up such a site, with buyers giving their credit card number before gaining access to the e-book they're interested in. Once you have such a site set up, you just plug in each new of-

fering and then sit back and let the money roll in month after month.

At least that's the theory. Obviously getting your site at the top of search engine lists, getting visitors to actually buy your product, and promoting your books with other Web sites and magazines is essential to making it in such a business. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it, right?

Self-publishing is a struggle and you'll have to spend much of your time with bookkeeping and advertising. But some writers enjoy this change of pace and discover they can handle their own books just as well as any publisher can — at least that's what they think. (Obviously I have doubts about this, since I'm letting a publisher handle this book for me!)

The main consideration with self-publishing is that there's no guarantee that your book will sell. When a publisher hires you, it takes on a lot of the chance, paying someone to edit your work, marketing it, and (usually) paying you an advance against sales, which you keep even if the book flops. Publishers gamble and do lose from time to time while the author of the dog causing their losses takes his check to the bank. Self-publishing can be heady stuff, but it is a high-wire act without the net afforded when you let someone else carry some of the risks.

Whether you're into writing in a number of fields, peddling novels on the side, acting as a consultant, or self-publishing, diversification will often enable you to earn more money. This can enable you to make a steady income as an author and often makes the difference between continuing as a writer or being forced to acquire an "honest job" with a whole lot less freedom.

Chapter Seven
Now Do It

After reading this book, you'll have the information you need to start on the road to becoming a nonfiction writer and perhaps even to branch out into other areas of the publishing business if you so desire. But having the knowledge and wanting to do something isn't the same as actually doing it. You have to take that first step and get started. You have to work to realize any dream, including that of being a published author.

Nonfiction writing doesn't have the glamour of fiction writing. But, once you become good at it, you aren't apt to starve to death waiting for that "lucky break" that never comes for many novelists and short story writers. Rather than compete for the crumbs that large publishers dole out, you can make a generous living as a nonfiction writer, working for the many publishers and publications that have successfully targeted lucrative niche markets.

You know my secrets. Now you've got to get to the "hard labor" of researching your market, getting an office set up (or straightened out), and locating the hardware and software tools you'll be needing to do your business. Once that's done, you'll have to write, write, and write some more, honing your skills.

Soon you'll have the attention of several publishers. Then you'll be getting stuff into print on a regular basis. If you keep working and honing your skills, you will meet with success.

Now is the time to take the first steps that will start you on your adventure.

Appendix

Here are some checklists that might be of help when you're getting started in writing. After a while this will all become second nature to you (and if it already is, then excuse me for insulting your intelligence). That said, I suspect many will find this of help so here goes:

Before the Final Rewrite

- ☐ If you've used a story form, has your point-of-view character remained consistent throughout the article/story?
- ☐ Is the tense consistent throughout? Past tense or present tense are best kept consistent throughout when possible.
- ☐ Dialogue is always good if well done. Have you made good use of it? Conversely, too much dialogue can be tedious. Don't be afraid to cut long-winded passages.
- ☐ Is the opening weak or strong? Remember it's your hook to capture the editor.
- ☐ Are the middle and ending strong?
- ☐ The title is very important. Don't skimp on this. Will it captivate the reader?

- ☐ Watch for errors in your use of language and punctuation. For example: "There" instead of "their," "to" for "too," etc.
- ☐ Avoid excessive use of adjectives and adverbs.
- ☐ Personification of animals and things is usually best avoided.
- ☐ Avoid trite or worn metaphors.
- ☐ Don't use more than one exclamation mark per article.

When Your Manuscript Is Ready

- ☐ Do you have a good cover letter to send with your manuscript?
- ☐ Is your name, address, and phone number on the front page of the manuscript?
- ☐ Have you double-spaced (if the publisher's guidelines ask for this)?
- ☐ Is your name and/or article title at the top or bottom of each page (after page 1)?
- ☐ Are your pages numbered?
- ☐ Are the pages connected with a paper clip?
- ☐ Have you included an SASE for return of the manuscript?
- ☐ Do you have enough postage? You don't want to start out with a postage due envelope to greet your editor.

While Waiting

- ☐ Don't call the editor unless he's published other of your articles.
- ☐ Do start on a new article.
- ☐ Don't let a rejection discourage you. Try, try again is the secret to being successful in writing.

Other Titles of Interest:

THE TEMP WORKER'S GUIDE TO SELF-FULFILLMENT, How to slack off, achieve your dreams, and get paid for it!, *by Dennis Fiery.* Temporary employment, or "temp work," can be a treasure trove of opportunity for the dedicated practitioner. Rather than being a series of dead-end meaningless short-term jobs, temp work offers numerous advantages. This book explains how to effectively exploit and undermine the temp system. It contains all the information needed to successfully obtain steady, lucrative work as a temp, while satisfying the requirements of the employers who are seeking competent temp workers and fulfilling your own special needs. ***1997, 5½ x 8½, 152 pp, illustrated, soft cover.*** **$12.95. Order Number 64210.**

SECOND-HAND SUCCESS: How to Turn Discards into Dollars, *by Jordan L. Cooper.* This is the story of successful people who turn discards into dollars. Jordan L. Cooper reveals the tricks used by dozens of clever entrepreneurs to turn trash into treasures. Learn where to find all kinds of used merchandise and where to sell it for top dollar. From recycling to foraging in grandma's attic to making art from junk, this is the best resource of its kind. Topics covered include: sources of supply; tips on merchandising; swap meet survival; used clothing; small appliances & household goods; paperback books; used cars; seasonal merchandise; antiques & collectibles; arts & crafts from junque; restoration; handling problems; and much more! ***1995, 5½ x 8½, 196 pp, illustrated, soft cover.*** **$14.95. Order Number 64167.**

$HADOW MERCHANT$, Successful Retailing Without a Storefront, *by Jordan L. Cooper.* How to make money in low-overhead, street corner-style operations by someone who's been there. Covers: swap meets, flea markets; street corners; arts & crafts shows; mall kiosks; fairs & carnivals; gun shows; special interest events; and much more! Also includes valuable advice on pitfalls to avoid. Shadow businesses are highly mobile, low-cost, low-risk operations that can be started without giving up your regular job. Many of the world's most famous businesses started out this way. The next success story could be yours. ***1993, 5½ x 8½, 152 pp, illustrated, soft cover.*** **$12.95. Order Number 64145.**

HOW TO MAKE CASH MONEY SELLING AT SWAP MEETS, FLEA MARKETS, ETC., ***by Jordan L. Cooper.*** You can make money selling at swap meets, flea markets, etc. — once in a while as a part-time income, or as a full-time business. After years of making good money at flea markets, the author lets you in on the secrets of success. His tips and how-to's were learned from the School of Hard Knocks and can save you some hard knocks of your own. Topics covered include: what to sell; transportation; how to display your wares; pricing; advertising; bad weather; the IRS; and much more. A low initial investment is all that's required. You can still hold your regular job while getting started, and you will be your own boss. ***1988, 5½ x 8½, 180 pp, illustrated, soft cover.*** **$16.95. Order Number 13077.**

BE YOUR OWN DICK, Private Investigating Made Easy, Revised and Expanded Second Edition, ***by John Q. Newman,*** Most detective work involves simple research you can do yourself — if you know where to look. This edition includes new information on using the Internet, software, and computer databases, how to find out everything about your target's finances, health, employment, pastimes, and "past lives." If you want to know whether someone is rich or a deadbeat, whether they're on the level or a fraud, whether they're cheating on you, stealing from you, or lying to you, then ***Be Your Own Dick. 1999, 5½ x 8½, 156 pp, soft cover.*** **$14.00. Order Number 55117.**

HOW TO FIND MISSING PERSONS, A Handbook for Investigators, Revised and Expanded Second Edition, ***by Ronald Eriksen.*** This book is the bible for bounty hunters, private investigators, skip tracers, process servers, repo men, genealogists, adoptees, and many others. The author is a no-bull investigator who shows you how to follow someone's trail and how to coax information out of people who would rather not tell. This all-purpose guide is highlighted with case histories from real-life missing persons investigations. If you're looking for someone special, you couldn't ask for a better guide. ***1994, 5½ x 8½, 215 pp, soft cover.*** **$16.95. Order Number 61145.**

THE ART & SCIENCE OF DUMPSTER DIVING, ***by John Hoffman.*** This book will show you how to get just about anything you want or need — food, clothing, furniture, building materials, entertainment, luxury goods, tools, toys — you name it — *ABSOLUTELY FREE!* Take a guided tour of America's back alleys where amazing wealth is carelessly discarded. Hoffman will show you where to find the good stuff, how to rescue it and how to use it. You'll find illustrated techniques, recipes for salvaged food, how to convert trash into cash, and how to handle run-ins with cops. It took the author a lifetime to learn this — all it takes for you is this book. ***1993, 8½ x 11, 152 pp, illustrated, soft cover.*** **$14.95. Order Number 14099.**

THE HYDROPONIC HOTHOUSE, Low-Cost, High-Yield Greenhouse Gardening, ***by James B. Dekorne.*** An illustrated guide to alternative-energy greenhouse gardening. Includes directions for building several different greenhouses; practical advice on harnessing solar energy; and many hard-earned suggestions for increasing plant yield. This is the first easy-to-use guide to home hydroponics. This hard-core working manual for the serious gardener is fully illustrated with diagrams, charts, and photographs. ***1992, 5½ x 8½, 178 pp, illustrated, indexed, soft cover.*** **$16.95. Order Number 14133.**

HOW TO LIVE WITHOUT ELECTRICITY — AND LIKE IT!, ***by Anita Evangelista.*** There's no need to remain dependent on commercial electrical systems for your home's comforts and security. This book describes many alternative methods that can help you become more self-reliant and free from the utility companies. Learn how to light, heat and cool your home, obtain and store water, cook and refrigerate food, and fulfill many other household needs without paying the power company! This book contains photographs, illustrations and mail-order listings to make your transition to independence a snap! ***1997, 5½ x 8½, 168 pp, illustrated, soft cover.*** **$13.95. Order Number 14187.**

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